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12-13-2022

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Cassidy Wiltjer

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois, cassidywiltjer19@augustana.edu*

Anna Winn

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois, annawinn20@augustana.edu*

Linnea Johansen

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois, linneajohansen20@augustana.edu*

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#### Recommended Citation

Wiltjer, Cassidy; Winn, Anna; and Johansen, Linnea. "Times Are Changing: Addressing Racism and Sexism in Die Zauberflöte" (2022). *2022 Festschrift: Mozart's Die Zauberflöte*.

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Times Are Changing: Addressing Racism and Sexism in *Die Zauberflöte*

Linnea Johansen  
Cassidy Wiltjer  
Anna Winn

Augustana College  
MUSC 311—Styles and Literature of Music I  
December 14, 2022

**ABSTRACT:** The eighteenth century philosophy regarding discrimination based on gender and race do not align with the philosophy of the modern era. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, written in 1791, is full of racist and misogynist remarks which are woven carefully into the music and plot of the opera. Racism is evident through the character of Monostatos and the claims that his status as a Moor make him less valuable as a human being. Additionally, the character Sarastro exemplifies a rational and powerful male while the Queen of the Night, while powerful in her own right, is the villain: an unruly, emotional woman. These aspects must be addressed and will influence how we produce *Die Zauberflöte* in the current day. Instead of erasing this important historical work, future productions of this opera and other similar works should be made through a more humanitarian and educational lens.

Racism and misogyny abound in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. Premiered in the late 18th century, the opera is still being performed over 200 years later. Over the last two centuries, the more problematic content of the opera has risen to the surface. These instances of racism and misogyny are key components to the opera's plot, and they can be quite shocking and offensive to the modern-day audience. The controversial nature of the opera has sparked conversation of how to go about producing operas such as this one in a sensitive manner. Though this opera is undeniably problematic in the modern day context, we must be careful to not entirely erase this historical piece; in fact, it is vital that we continue to produce works of this nature through a more progressive and humanitarian lens. Through this perspective, we are able to acknowledge the detrimental effects of their problematic elements while also maintaining the artistic integrity of these influential works.

Much of the racism that occurs in *Die Zauberflöte* surrounds the character of Monostatos, Sarastro's slave. Monostatos is classified as a "Moor", which was a derogatory term used during the Baroque period in Germany to refer to dark-skinned individuals of African or East Asian descent.<sup>1</sup> The way this character is portrayed is reflective of the commonality of racism during the time period in which the opera was written, and this is baked into the opera in both subtle and obvious ways. One of these former instances of racism is seen in an aria sung by Monostatos about his undying love for Pamina, "Alles fühlt der Liebe Freuden," in which he laments that his love will never be reciprocated due to his skin color. Uncomfortable lyrics that explicitly state "a black man is ugly... white is beautiful" make it clear that Pamina is desirable to Monostatos because she is white, reinforcing the racist idea that white is superior to Black.<sup>2</sup> Another more subtle example of racism is that the character is portrayed as foolish

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<sup>1</sup> Rebekka von Mallinckrodt, Josef Köstlbauer, and Sarah Lentz, *Beyond Exceptionalism: Traces of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Early Modern Germany, 1650-1850* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 114.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Faulwell, "The Magic Flute: An Educational Opportunity?" (Medium, 2020).

through the comedic nature of his aria, which combines a light, quick tempo with sorrowful lyrics.<sup>3</sup> This comes with the implication that even though Monostatos is a person with true emotions and desires, he is not to be taken seriously because he is just a Moor. Additionally, there are multiple instances of racism that involve the other characters' treatment of Monostatos, most notably a moment where Sarastro has other slaves beat the Moor.<sup>4</sup> This and other instances of race-motivated mistreatment were common during the Baroque period, but can be very uncomfortable to witness on a stage in the modern day.

The actions of Monstatos himself, specifically those that shape his role in the opera's plot, contribute to the more obvious forms of racism. Throughout the opera he is painted as evil, as he is described as "wicked", consistently acts in a violent way towards Pamina, and tries to rape her.<sup>5</sup> The implication of racism may be different if Monostatos were simply a Black character who happens to be evil, but the addition of the aria, as well as the fact that he lives up to every stereotype applied to him by the other characters, suggest that this is not the case. It is further evident that the portrayal of Monostatos is racist when considering the fact that his character was traditionally performed in blackface up until the 20th century.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his major scenes, Monostatos exhibits outbursts due to the color of his skin but also shows privilege of being a man during the eighteenth century, capable of kissing a sleeping woman. While this instance does not ultimately lead to rape, the consequences of this authoritative position of a man over a woman remain troublesome. This demonstrates the dated concepts of male domination and

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<sup>3</sup>Alyssa Howards, "Beyond the Glockenspiel: Teaching Race and Gender in Mozart's *Zauberflöte*," *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German* 47, no. 1 (2014): 1-13.

<sup>4</sup> Julian Ruston, "The Magic Flute," *Grove Music Online* (December 1, 1992), <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.o006477>.

<sup>5</sup> Faulwell, "The Magic Flute: An Educational Opportunity?"

<sup>6</sup> Jeremy Johnson, "The Matter of Monostatos," *Houston Grand Opera*, January 3, 2022, <https://www.houstongrandopera.org/blog/posts/2022/january/the-matter-of-monostatos/>.

subsequent female submission. In this context, rape derives from the belief that females should behave as an object, a property for which males may use for their personal satisfaction, political gain and social status.<sup>7</sup> Here, Monostatos may have used his status as a man over Pamina, but was instead overcome by his status as a Moor. Yet the combination of music, text, and action in opera create an atmosphere where the words sung have particularly challenging meanings that the audience can understand from multiple angles<sup>8</sup>. Implication that rape is acceptable from a man, yet not acceptable from a Black man creates a double standard for the modern day audience to consider.

Assertions that women are inferior to men are made clear through dialogue specifically from Papageno and Sarastro, who assumes that women are unfit for the jobs that men fulfill. For example, Sarastro says to Pamina that “a man must guide your hearts, for without him all women tend to step outside their own sphere of activity.”<sup>9</sup> This demeaning comment, directed at a woman, proves the philosophy of the time. Men were superior to women and therefore women needed the reason and the logic of a man to lead a successful life. Additionally, Papageno consistently describes his need for a wife, yet disrespects women in conversation. When he is tasked to remain silent with Tamino, Papageno says to Tamino, “surely I can talk to myself, and the two of us can talk to each other, too - we are men after all,” implying that men are above the law and that only women may not speak with him<sup>10</sup>. This shows that women need men, but the men do not need women.

Evidently, Mozart did not shy away from composing operas with librettos that stereotyped gender roles, and the treatment of women demonstrates the reality from the eighteenth century. This opera was

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<sup>7</sup> Cusick, 219.

<sup>8</sup> Howards, 1.

<sup>9</sup> “Libretto from Die Zauberflöte,” Opera, accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.opera-arias.com/mozart/die-zauberflote/libretto/english/>.

<sup>10</sup> Libretto.

written in 1791, so it exhibits many traits that are characteristic of the late eighteenth century, mainly the Enlightenment ideals. The philosophical movement of the Enlightenment includes an emphasis on logic and reasoning. In fact, the Enlightenment is meant to free men from their immaturity, and give way to thought-provoking logical responses.<sup>11</sup> These became opposite to the stereotypical representation of an emotional woman. For example, the character Sarastro came to represent the logic and desirable traits from the Enlightenment period: freedom from the restraints of formulaic thinking, and instead giving way to thinking in rational and logical ways. Quite opposite from this is the Queen of the Night. She embodies an overly dramatic, emotional character that is a typical representation of females during this time. Her aria, “Der Hölle Rache,” full of fury and rage, demands her daughter to kill who she deems is evil: Sarastro. This heated interaction is meant to depict the Queen of the Night as less controlled, less precise, less logical than Sarastro. Additionally, the coloratura tessitura in this aria reflects the stereotyped vocal range of a heroine, a programmed operatic tradition for soprano voices. Though typically a soprano voice would be viewed in a positive light, in this context, the Queen of the Night symbolizes a pro-emotional, anti-intelligent person— opposing that of Sarastro and thus solidifying her role as the true villain in this opera.<sup>12</sup> The aria is technically impressive and also clearly displays strong emotions both in the text, music, and performance. In this way, the Queen of the Night’s deceptive nature and the inability to control her emotions highlight the traits that were viewed as undesirable during the time period this opera was composed.

With all the problematic notions of sexism in this opera, there are instances that can be seen as feminist. For example, the very first scene includes the servants of the Queen of the Night. These servants

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<sup>11</sup> James Schmidt, ed., *What Is Enlightenment? : Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, ProQuest Ebook Central, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Howards, 3.

use magic to kill a giant serpent, and triumph over the main character and supposed man of great strength, Tamino. Additionally, the Queen of the Night sings a powerful rage aria, showing her strength in both vocal and political power. While her portrayal as a villain can be seen as problematic, she indeed shows power and strength, opposite of what most female characters were allowed.

With these aspects of the opera in mind, both positive and negative, we must turn our attention to how this work would be performed today. The racism and sexism are inherent in many of the characters' dialogues, arias, and recitatives. Therefore, we must ask ourselves what the best process would be to address these issues.

An article by Houston Grand Opera on different portrayals of the character of Monostatos in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* poses a couple of important questions: Should we continue to produce historical works with problematic content? If we choose to do so, should they be prefaced with commentary about the stereotypical, harmful matter within them?<sup>13</sup> Many famous performing arts groups have chosen to take a stand against the outdated ideas and beliefs present in staples of their respective genres. World-renowned opera companies, including the Lyric Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, and opera schools across Europe, have chosen to alter the content or presentation of well-known operas in order to better reflect modern perceptions of what is or is not acceptable. This is reflected especially in relation to any content that could be considered offensive, derogatory, or otherwise disrespectful. With all of this in mind, it is imperative that we evaluate how and whether or not these works can be presented in a way that is thoughtful and meaningful. A number of directors of modern productions of *Die Zauberflöte* have wondered about these same issues, ultimately making their own decisions about how to navigate them. In

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<sup>13</sup> Johnson, "The Matter of Monostatos."



traditional productions of the opera, some directors have chosen to frame the Queen of the Night as glaringly antagonistic and Sarastro as revered and full of wisdom. The idea here is that Sarastro's positive qualities, and by proxy, Monostatos's association with Sarastro, will outshine the negative aspects of each character's presentation. A more contemporary performance of this opera, directed by feminist Polly Graham at the Royal College of Music in London, takes the opposite approach; rather than amplifying the Queen of the Night's questionable actions, Graham portrays her through a more empathetic lens, and Sarastro is presented as leering and predatory<sup>14</sup>. In another performance of this opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago holds itself to IDEA (Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access) in all its productions. Most notably, Anthony Jones, coordinator for the Lyric's Learning and Creative Engagement team, stated that "[t]alented, diverse, and progressively oriented production teams like those hired at the Lyric can surmount these bigoted elements, and tell the drama of many operas in ways that leave its antiquated discrimination in the past".<sup>15</sup>

When examining our own thoughts on Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* and the implications of producing the opera in the present day, we initially considered a few conclusions. We decided that it is important to keep the concept of presentism in mind and be careful of its influence when thinking about how to perform this opera. Presentism is defined as the tendency to interpret the past through the lens of modern values and beliefs. A strict presentist analysis of this opera would acknowledge the "damsel in distress" narrative central to its plot and the blatantly racist and bigoted nature of Monostatos's character, as well as additional instances of sexism and racism throughout the opera, finding all of these elements to be harmful and outdated. Therefore, to depict this opera through the lens of presentism would involve

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<sup>14</sup> John Launer, "Operatic Reflections: Mozart's Magic Flute, #MeToo, and Families in Primary Care," *British Journal of General Practice* 72, no. 717 (January 15, 2022): 181.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Jones, "Augustana College Music Group Project" Email, 2022.

eliminating much of its contents, if not the entirety of the plot. Since completely taking out dialogue and parts of scenes interferes with the artistic integrity of Mozart's original work, we believe presentism is not the lens through which to go about presenting the opera. Instead, it is important to separate some of the more harmful implications from the art itself and prioritize telling a meaningful story.

In order to produce *Die Zauberflöte* in a modern and mindful way, we would implement the following strategies. One of our top priorities would be to avoid altering the libretto, the music itself, and the most basic elements of the opera, primarily the characters' names and core traits and the overall plot. These aspects of the opera are much of what gives it structure and substance; to make any significant changes to them would take away from the story, and in fact, tell a different story altogether. We feel it is essential to preserve the grounding elements of the opera in order to effectively tell its story. Instead, we would opt to alter more flexible elements, those that are typically up to the director's discretion and vision. Modifications would be made to the development of the characters through the delivery of lines, facial expressions and character reactions, staging, and costuming. By altering the way certain characters are developed, we are able to frame them in a different way than a more traditional production might. Specifically, we would follow director Polly Graham's lead, especially with Sarastro, Monostatos, and the Queen of the Night. In contrast with the typical portrayal of Sarastro as wise and respected, we would highlight his predatory nature and the way he uses his position of power to his advantage. This progressive analysis of Sarastro brings attention to his problematic characteristics while also demonstrating that Monostatos is far from the only character with misogynistic, harmful traits. Monostatos's beliefs and behavior are obviously troublesome, but by recognizing that these are not unique to him, we minimize the sole villainization of the only Black character in the opera. Additionally,

it is of extreme importance to us that the Queen of the Night's key traits are showcased with honesty and empathy. She is dramatic, emotional, and strong-willed, but we believe that these traits should not be conflated with any intentions of being controlling or cruel. Rather, the Queen is fiercely loving and protective of her daughter, and these notions are evident in her actions. To supplement these directing choices, we would consider including a note in the audience program with information about the opera and the decisions we have made.

Simply put, the racism and sexism in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* are jarringly evident to modern sensibilities. These problematic remarks and themes are inherent throughout the opera's libretto and music. As a work composed during the Enlightenment, it is not surprising that this work contains elements of racism and sexism; these ideas are consistent with the time period. However, it is undeniable that this affects how we produce this opera in the modern day. Though the Enlightenment valued rethinking the structure of humanity, freeing minds from emotions and irrationality, its ideals were still prejudiced against women and people of color. Rather than completely removing or dismissing the opera's outdated content, we should discuss it, exercising artistic integrity and compassion. Being willing to explore sensitive topics within historically significant works allows us to simultaneously share these works and educate audiences in the process. In honoring Mozart's influential opera, it must be performed in a way that also recognizes its problematic aspects.

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