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A Search for Enlightenment in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*

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Abstract

The Enlightenment was a time of philosophy, critical thinking, and brotherhood. Society at the time felt it was possible to find true meaning and connections with the world around them. Ideas were spread through newspapers, pamphlets, and social gatherings such as lodges. This spread of ideas reached Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and affected his opera, *Die Zauberflöte*. Themes of the Enlightenment are found in the characterizations of Tamino, Papageno, Pamina, the Queen, and Sarastro. This essay describes characterizations and analyzes how themes of Enlightenment appear in the opera.

The Enlightenment dominated Europe during the 18th century. It was a means of discovering new unknowns and gaining a new sense of awareness. The main goal of the Enlightenment was to impart light or wisdom and reach a new higher understanding of humanity and the world surrounding it.<sup>1</sup> The main tenets of the Enlightenment include man being in harmony with the universe, natural law, universal order, rationalism, and recognition. The Enlightenment made its original home in France in the early 18th century sometime after the French Revolution. Some scholars believe that it began during an academic debate between the Ancients and Moderns and pivoted on the idea of philosophy. The Ancients and Moderns debated about art and literacy, which served as the foundation of French Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup> From then on, the Enlightenment spread throughout Europe and to the United States.

The main tenets of the Enlightenment were practiced most notably by a group of people called the Freemasons who had a deep connection to philosophy and critical thinking, and placed a large emphasis on brotherhood.<sup>3</sup> They saw humanity as one large family and believed that the Enlightenment dictated true friendship. Despite all of these seemingly acceptable principles by today's standards, they were seen as dangerous in the somewhat feudal system that dominated Europe in the 18th century.<sup>4</sup> In 1738, Pope Clement XII issued an edict that banned the Freemasons. At first, Austria didn't pay any mind to the ban because Francis Joseph I (Emperor of Austro-Hungary b. 1830-1916) was part of the order; however, after his death they were persecuted by his widow, Maria Theresa.<sup>5</sup> Near the second half of the century, several different branches of Freemasonry came to fruition. The most significant of these were

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<sup>1</sup> Waldoff, Jessica. "The Music of Recognition: Operatic Enlightenment in 'The Magic Flute.'" *Music & Letters* 75, no. 2 (1994): 214–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/737677>, 215.

<sup>2</sup> Warner, William B. "The Enlightenment: A (French) Restoration." *The Eighteenth Century* 54, no. 3 (2013): 415–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24575090>, 416.

<sup>3</sup> Thomson, Katharine. "Mozart and Freemasonry." *Music & Letters* 57, no. 1 (1976): 25–46. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/733806>, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

the Rosicrucians who focused on more transcendent aspects of Masonry, and the Illuminati who focused on more political and rationalist aspects.<sup>6</sup> The leader of the Illuminati in Europe at the time of the late 18th century was Joseph von Sonnenfels, who was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's patron. He was the founder of a lodge called True Harmony which Mozart frequented often.<sup>7</sup> This led to the influence of the Enlightenment showing up in some of Mozart's works, most notably *Die Zauberflöte*.

Freemasonry is one of the main ideals of the Enlightenment that is portrayed in *Die Zauberflöte*. There is an emphasis placed on orders and society, as well as philosophy. The Masons in late eighteenth century Vienna supported many of the philosophical and political ideals of the time period, as the ideas of the Enlightenment were spread with the help of lodges and newspapers. The ideals of the time were shown significantly throughout the opera.<sup>8</sup> The idea of Freemasonry is shown most notably in the characterization of both Tamino and Sarastro, as well as Sarastro's order of priests. For example, in the third act of *Die Zauberflöte*, Tamino strives to join Sarastro's order, and in turn has to complete three different trials. In the end, he achieves his goal and reaches true enlightenment and joins Sarastro.<sup>9</sup>

The theme of knowledge also ties into the ideals and culture of the Enlightenment. This is represented by Tamino. As the opera progresses, Tamino realizes that his perception of the Queen, Sarastro, and Pamina's abduction is false. In turn, he also realizes that everything he knows about the world around him and even himself is false. Tamino's character represents the notion of the quest of knowledge. There is both the knowledge of the self as well as knowledge for the self.<sup>10</sup> He strives to learn more about the world around him and conform to the ideals of Sarastro, as well as celebrate an era of

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 217.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 233.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 221.

wisdom. In order for Tamino to gain the ability to gain this knowledge and wisdom, he must complete a series of three trials. This is somewhat similar to the experience that people during the late 17th to early 18th century went through if they wanted to reach enlightenment, in the sense that there must be certain things done in order to fully see the world for what it is.<sup>11</sup> The trials represented the spiritual and mental journey required to become enlightened.

Then, there is Papageno, who is the complete opposite of Tamino. Unlike Tamino, Papageno does not care much about completing the trials. As a matter of fact, in the first trial when both Tamino and Papageno are told not to speak, Papageno fails almost instantly. He cares more about the simple pleasures of life and finding love, as opposed to the thirst for knowledge. Papageno represents the unenlightened.<sup>12</sup> There are multiple opportunities presented to him throughout *Die Zauberflöte* to reach enlightenment, however he seemingly rejects them every time. By the end of the opera, Papageno meets and marries Papagena. These two represent those who remain happily unenlightened. They wish only to get married and have children, with little care given to the pursuit of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

A neglected but important theme presented throughout the opera is the idea of recognition. This is the philosophy that follows the shift from ignorance to knowledge, and when presented in productions like *Die Zauberflöte*, involves the complete change in opinion and understanding among the main characters, such as Tamino and Pamina.<sup>14</sup> There are two main ideals that play a part when it is involved in a story. The first ideal is the sense of what recognition actually is. This is where knowledge itself is the subject of a story, and is developed as a function of both the plot and as a central theme. The second ideal

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 216.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 233.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 214.

is the sense of new awareness, which essentially is to relearn information in a way that involves a new understanding. This idea of knowledge is the recovery of something that is already known, which lies deep within one's memory waiting to be brought to the surface. With both of these implications, recognition is both the gaining and the regaining of knowledge.<sup>15</sup> An example of a crucial scene of recognition is Tamino's recitative at the beginning of the finale in Act I. Prince Tamino has finally gotten to Sarastro's realm on his quest to find Princess Pamina, where he meets the Priest, who will not let Tamino pass. Now he has his moment of recognition, pleading to the eternal night when it will end and when the light will strike his eyes. Tamino has now become aware of Pamina's abduction, the Queen's distress, of Sarastro's true nature, and the understanding of the world and of himself have been false all along. He has never questioned the Queen and has always believed Sarastro to be evil, but his new awareness is a reversal of his former understanding.<sup>16</sup> The Enlightenment was about discovering what was unknown about certain ideas and to stop believing some of the dominating powers during Mozart's time, such as the Church. The idea of recognition in *Die Zauberflöte* brings that same ideal of Enlightenment, and exposing the truth to the people, comparable to how Tamino was able to come up with the truth about the Queen of the Night and others around him.

The Enlightenment had a large impact on Europe in the 18th century. The spread of ideas reached many people in society, even Mozart and his opera. His work displays free thinking, brotherhood, quest for knowledge and recognition, something that was incredibly controversial at the time. This goes to show just how big of an influence the Enlightenment had on society and personal ideals during the 18th Century.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 220.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 221.

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