

## Introduction

JESSICA WALDOFF

A week after the premiere of *The Magic Flute*, Mozart wrote to his wife Constanze, “I have this moment returned from the opera, which was as full as ever. . . . But what always gives me most pleasure is the *silent approval!* You can see how this opera is becoming more and more esteemed.”<sup>1</sup> He could not possibly have imagined then, in October of 1791, how his opera’s fortunes would rise in the years to come. *The Magic Flute* remained in the repertoire at the Theater auf der Wieden and by 1801 had received over 200 performances. It was staged in Prague in 1792, as well as in Leipzig, Munich, Dresden, and a host of other German cities in 1793 and the years immediately following. In his 1798 biography, Franz Xaver Niemetschek claimed, “Who in Germany does not know it? Is there a single theatre where it has not been performed? It is our national opera.”<sup>2</sup> The opera soon reached stages in many European centers, including St. Petersburg (1797), Amsterdam (1799), Paris (1801), London (1811), and Milan (1816). Today, *The Magic Flute* is Mozart’s most frequently performed opera around the globe. According to Operabase, which documents opera productions and performances worldwide for every season, *The Magic Flute* is consistently listed among the “10 Most Played Titles” (along with *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Don Giovanni*). In some seasons, including 2020/2021, 2021/2022, and 2022/2023, it has been the most performed opera by any composer.<sup>3</sup> The data available so far for 2023/2024 suggests that *The Magic Flute* will, once again, receive the most performances.

In the years since its premiere, *The Magic Flute* has been written about in a variety of contexts, by a multitude of authors, and from a dizzying range of perspectives. While it would be impossible for any single volume to adequately capture the range and complexity of more than two centuries’ worth of research, commentary, and performance, this *Cambridge Companion to “The Magic Flute”* provides twenty-one essays on diverse topics, all newly written expressly for this collection. One important predecessor to this volume is Peter Branscombe’s 1991 *Cambridge Opera Handbook*, *W. A. Mozart: “Die Zauberflöte.”* Since that time, however, there have been significant documentary discoveries and developments.

A wealth of recent scholarship – ranging from books on Mozart and his contemporaries to studies of opera as a genre to explorations of Mozart’s contemporary Viennese and German contexts – has broadened the ways in which we understand this opera. This Companion provides up-to-date commentary and interpretation in a single volume, with special emphasis on four key areas.

Part I, “Conception and Context,” situates the opera in its immediate historical, cultural, and geographic context. As a German opera written expressly for Schikaneder’s suburban Theater auf der Wieden with its tradition of magic operas and machine comedies, *The Magic Flute* was created for a particular place and time. The playbill announced “Eine grosse Oper” (A grand opera); newspapers reported extraordinary expense associated with costumes and scenery; Mozart and Schikaneder pulled out all the stops, including Italianate singing for the serious characters and Volkstheater humor for the comic ones. Four authors bring contemporary German opera in Vienna to life, situate the libretto in the context of German Enlightenment theater reform, offer a portrait of the Theater auf der Wieden and its players, and provide vibrant details and iconography associated with the premiere and early performances.

Part II, “Music, Text, and Action,” is devoted to the opera’s musical drama. Although no one would deny the centrality of music in opera, music has not always been the focus of studies of *The Magic Flute*, and even when it has been, discussion has tended to concentrate on select moments such as favorite arias and Tamino’s colloquy with the Priest in the Act 1 finale. Essays in this section, individually and collectively, explore how Schikaneder and Mozart indicate dramatic action in text and music and with attention to the whole opera, providing a sense of character, plot, emotional life, mood, setting, stage direction, and special effects. Important topics, individual moments, and analytical questions are given new and illuminating treatment here.

Part III, “Approaches and Perspectives,” addresses issues that might easily fill an entire volume. The five essays in this section explore essential thematic questions in *The Magic Flute*, all of which have taken on new significance in recent decades. Each is immersed in an interpretive tradition and its attendant assumptions, and each engages with that tradition to pose an important question. How should we understand the opera’s search for Enlightenment? How should we understand its complex inclusion of exoticism and orientalism? How should we make sense of conflicting claims made about the work’s sources and meanings? How should we understand and stage the opera’s problematic representations of gender

and race? Each of these essays opens a hermeneutic window through which we may view the work anew.

Part IV, “Reception, Interpretation, and Influence,” offers five eclectic essays that trace *The Magic Flute* as it gained prominence, not merely on stages in Germany and across Europe but also in the cultural imagination. Readers may be surprised to discover the extensive material culture surrounding the opera, which emerged as early as 1792: from colorful prints and invitation cards to board games and fashion accessories to mechanical clocks and music boxes. In the decade following its premiere and in the early years of the nineteenth century, *The Magic Flute*, perhaps more than any other work by Mozart, played an unexpected role in shaping how future generations would think about Mozart and come to understand him. This may be seen in biography, criticism, literature, and art. A review of what the sources do and do not tell us and how they have influenced our collective understanding of the opera reads like a cautionary tale. This section also includes a brief, but sweeping, overview of the opera as it has been staged in productions ranging from the eighteenth century to the present day and concludes with a tribute to Ingmar Bergman’s 1975 film.

For much of its 230-year history, critics and audiences have wanted to understand *The Magic Flute* as a theatrical entertainment with something for everyone, but also as one with a message. The exact nature of the message, however, has been much disputed over the years – at times, passionately. As early as 1794 the opera was read as a political allegory in pamphlets that advanced competing interpretations: pro-Jacobin and anti-Jacobin.<sup>4</sup> It has been understood as a Masonic allegory and as an allegory of Enlightenment. Mozart himself suggests the presence of a message in his letter of October 8–9, 1791, when he complains about the “know-all” who laughed at the “solemn scene” at the beginning of Act 2. “At first, I was patient enough to draw his attention to a few passages. But he laughed at everything. Well, I could stand it no longer. I called him a Papageno and cleared out.”<sup>5</sup> Goethe made a comment when contemplating the possibility of staging the “Helena Act” from *Faust II* that similarly assumes a deeper significance: “I will be satisfied if most of the theater-goers enjoy the spectacle; the initiated will not miss the deeper meaning . . . just as is the case with *Die Zauberflöte* and other such things.”<sup>6</sup> George Bernard Shaw claimed, “*Die Zauberflöte* is the ancestor, not only of the Ninth Symphony but of the Wagnerian allegorical music-drama, with personified abstractions instead of individualized characters as *dramatis personae*.”<sup>7</sup> Alfred Einstein described the opera in his biography as “on the surface a suburban machine-comedy, but in reality a piece for all mankind.”<sup>8</sup> For many,

Bergman captured this sense of the work as a *theatrum mundi* at the beginning of his film when he panned the audience during the overture to highlight a diverse group of spectators: young and old, men and women, dark-skinned and white. Egil Törnqvist used this moment to argue that “*The Magic Flute*, transcending the boundaries of age, gender and race, has universal significance.”<sup>9</sup>

Like all artworks for which such interpretations and claims have been made, *The Magic Flute* is the product of a particular time and place. Without question, the opera has significance, but we cannot be expected to all agree on what that significance is. It should not be made to bear the weight of universalizing claims. For one thing, with apologies to Foucault, the assumption of any dominant view attempts to assert a “principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning.”<sup>10</sup> For another, as many have pointed out in recent decades, the opera’s misogyny and racism are significant problems. The Queen and Monostatos cannot be reconciled with such universalizing views. *The Magic Flute*, however, offers us something more valuable: a mirror in which we may see reflected the contradictions and complexity of human nature. The essays in this volume suggest many ways of understanding the opera and approaching its mysteries, allowing us to experience it anew with attention to questions that mattered in Mozart’s time and still matter in ours.

## Notes

1. Letter of October 7–8, 1791 (the emphasis is Mozart’s: “*Stille Beifall!*”). LMF, 966–67; MBA, IV:157.
2. Franz Xaver Niemetschek, *Mozart: The First Biography*, trans. Helen Mautner, with an introduction by Cliff Eisen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), 73.
3. Operabase, “Statistics,” [www.operabase.com/statistics/en](http://www.operabase.com/statistics/en).
4. See Jay MacPherson, “*The Magic Flute* and Viennese Opinion,” *Man and Nature* 6 (1987): 161–72; H. C. Robbins Landon, *The Golden Years, 1781–1791* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), 259–60; COH, 219–20; Rachel Cowgill, “New Light and the Man of Might,” in *Art and Ideology in European Opera*, ed. Rachel Cowgill, David Cooper, and Clive Brown (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2010), 207–09.
5. LMF, 969; MBA, IV:160.
6. Cited in Robert Spaethling, *Music and Mozart in the Life of Goethe* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1987), 126.

7. From a centenary review in *The Illustrated London News*, December 9, 1891, in Bernard Shaw, *The Great Composers: Reviews and Bombardments*, ed. Louis Crompton (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 97.
8. Alfred Einstein, *Mozart: His Character, His Work*, trans. Arthur Mendel and Nathan Broder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 88.
9. Egil Törnqvist, *Bergman's Muses: Aesthetic Versatility in Film, Theatre, Television and Radio* (Jefferson, NC: MacFarland, 2003), 68.
10. Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" trans. Josué V. Harari, in *Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 118.

PART I

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Conception and Context

## 1 | German Opera in Mozart's Vienna

ESTELLE JOUBERT

### German Opera in Courtly and Urban Theaters in Vienna: From the National Singspiel (1778) to *Die Zauberflöte* (1791)

“Vienna has its share of all the genres: French comedy, Italian comedy, Italian opera, the grand Noverre ballets, German opera, and the like,” writes Johann Pezzl in the first volume of his famous *Skizze von Wien* (1786).<sup>1</sup> German opera in Mozart's Vienna interacted with many other theatrical genres in what was widely celebrated as a rich cosmopolitan European center.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the genre did not have its own distinctive musico-dramatic features and theatrical history. Vienna boasts a rich and varied German-language theatrical tradition dating back at least to the late seventeenth century, including Jesuit drama, improvised comedy in folk theaters, often interspersed with song, and musical theater performed by traveling troupes. One of the formative moments for eighteenth-century German opera was Joseph II's 1776 announcement of the opening of the German National Theater, a spoken theatrical enterprise, which performed in one of the two court theaters, the Burgtheater, renamed the Nationaltheater. Two years later, its operatic counterpart, the German National Singspiel, was inaugurated in the same space with a new work, *Die Bergknappen* (The Miners), composed by the company's first music director, Ignaz Umlauf. Featuring accomplished singers such as Caterina Cavalieri (who would later create the role of Konstanze in Mozart's 1782 opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* [*The Abduction from the Seraglio*]), this court-operated company produced a number of successful works. Prominent examples include Umlauf's *Die Apotheke* (The Apothecary, 1778), *Die schöne Schüsterin* (The Beautiful Cobbler, 1779), and *Das Irrlicht* (The Will-o'-the-Wisp, 1782); Franz Aspelmayr's *Die Kinder der Natur* (The Children of Nature, 1778); and Salieri's *Der Rauchfangkehrer* (The Chimney Sweep, 1781).

Home of the National Singspiel company, the Burgtheater was regarded as one of the finest theatrical spaces in Europe. Contemporary book and art

collector Georg Friedrich Brandes, in a description from 1786, distinguishes it from Parisian theaters by its size and lighting:

It does not have a beautiful form, but it is fine, decorated in white with gold, and the fourth balcony undoubtedly much larger than those [theaters] in Paris. The lighting is also superior here. In Parisian theaters a crown hangs, which nearly fully blinds the audience members in the balconies. In Vienna two lights are installed for two balconies, through which the unpleasantness is much more dispersed, and the amphitheater is better illuminated.<sup>3</sup>

Lighting was costly and the Burgtheater's luxury is revealed through its illumination, where candlelight glistened against the gold and white interior. Brandes emphasizes the opulence of the Viennese court, explaining that "the court here pays for everything, and has the income to do so."<sup>4</sup> During this initial period of the German National Singspiel, the genre was well supported and composers were provided with sufficient resources to create a distinctive German-language operatic repertory. Crucially, Joseph II was not interested in establishing a *Singspiel* troupe in the manner of earlier North German traditions – most notably that of Johann Adam Hiller – in which the performers were actors first, singers second. While a simple folk-like style certainly appears in late eighteenth-century Viennese *Singspiel*, efforts were made to recruit top singers for the National Singspiel enterprise, and a fine orchestra of at least thirty-five players was established, including strings, flutes, oboes, bassoons, horns, and, by 1782, trumpets and a kettledrum player.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the musical writing for Viennese *Singspiel* from 1778 onwards does not shy away from featuring virtuosic singing and lavish orchestral timbres to paint particular scenes or situations.

Though initially successful, the German troupe at the Burgtheater proved difficult to sustain. It was disbanded in 1783 and replaced by a company that produced Italian *opera buffa*, one of the more popular and financially sustainable repertoires. When a German company was reinstated in 1785, Emperor Joseph II issued a decree that withdrew performing privileges for all other troupes at the second royal theater, the Kärntnertortheater,<sup>6</sup> making it the new home for the German company, a practice which lasted until 1788. In 1787 Pezzl offered the following explanation for the reinstatement of the German company: "Since a large part of the public does not understand Italian, and one wishes to also entertain them with *Singspiele*, a German opera is established at the same time, which performs primarily at the Kärntnertortheater."<sup>7</sup> The new



troupe included singers such as Caterina Cavalieri and Aloysia Lange, and this period witnessed the production of *Singspiele* such as Franz Teyber's *Die Dorfdeputierten* (1785), Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor* (1786), Umlauf's *Die glücklichen Jäger* (1786), and Dittersdorf's *Doktor und Apotheker* (1786), among other works.

German opera in late eighteenth-century Vienna was not limited to the two royal theaters. Alongside the opening of the German National Theater in 1776, Joseph II also declared *Spektakelfreiheit*, literally meaning “freedom of spectacle,” which allowed new permanent private theaters to operate commercially. Three suburban theaters opened within a decade: the Theater in der Leopoldstadt, which was established in 1781 by Karl Marinelli; the Theater auf der Wieden, which opened in 1787 and was under the direction of Emanuel Schikaneder by 1788; and the Theater in der Josephstadt, which opened in 1788 and was run by Karl Mayer. Even with this *Spektakelfreiheit*, theater in Vienna was heavily censored at both the court and suburban theaters.<sup>8</sup> Each suburban theater specialized with respect to repertory. Marinelli's Theater in der Leopoldstadt was best known for its popular comedy in the Hanswurst tradition – popular entertainment, often improvised comedy, featuring the comic figure of “Hans Sausage.” Though of older origins, this type of entertainment had distinctly Viennese roots, which could be traced back to Hanswurst roles created by Josef Anton Stranitzky earlier in the century.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly the most famous theatrical fixture of this type in Mozart's day was the comic character Kaspar, who is described here by a contemporary:

But who, then, is Kaspar? He is the comedian at Marinelli's theater in Leopoldstadt. I might almost say [he is] an original genius, the only one of his kind. He knows the public's taste; with his gestures, face-pulling, and his off-the-cuff jokes he so electrifies the hands of the high nobility in the boxes, the civil servants and citizens on the second balcony, and the masses crammed together on the third floor that there is no end to the clapping.<sup>10</sup>

The actor playing Kaspar was Johann La Roche, and he appeared in many spoken plays and German operas, perhaps most famously as Pizichi in Wenzel Müller's *Kaspar der Fagottist* (1791). Like Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, this *Singspiel* finds its roots in August Jacob Liebeskind's fairytale “Lulu, oder Die Zauberflöte” (1789). Emanuel Schikaneder's Theater auf der Wieden (renamed the Theater an der Wien after a renovation in 1801) specialized in magic opera (*Zauberoper*) and machine theater (*Maschinentheater*). The space was outfitted with state-of-the-art technology and might well have

been the only theater that could have accommodated *The Magic Flute's* elaborate stage transformations.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the Theater in der Josephstadt was perhaps less important for German opera at the time of Mozart but gained importance in the nineteenth century. German opera in Mozart's Vienna thus traversed various theatrical venues, where it interacted with a wide range of theatrical genres, including French and Italian opera performed in translation, spoken theater, ballet, machine theater, and melodrama. This chapter offers an overview of German opera in Mozart's Vienna by considering moments in three seminal works: Ignaz Umlauf's *Die Bergknappen* (1778), which opened Joseph II's National Theater; Wranitzky's *Oberon*, a magic opera performed at the Theater auf der Wieden in 1789; and, finally, Wenzel Müller's *Kaspar der Fagottist*, performed at the Theater in der Leopoldstadt in 1791.

### Joseph II's Sonic Jewel at the Nationaltheater: Ignaz Umlauf's *Die Bergknappen* (1778)

Mining featured prominently in Enlightenment scientific, cultural, and political ideals. It served, as Jakob Vogel illustrates, to showcase the economic development of individual states and territories, embodied in “patriotic visions” of mineral collections open to the public.<sup>12</sup> It is no surprise, then, that the *Singspiel* Paul Weidmann and Ignaz Umlauf created to inaugurate Joseph II's German National *Singspiel* was *Die Bergknappen* (The Miners). Mining was not merely a regional enterprise that would add local color to an operatic work but a matter of patriotic pride. The Hapsburg Empire competed with other European states to expand its royal mineralogical collections and knowledge, and riches particular to geographic regions were fervently excavated and displayed. The premiere of *Die Bergknappen* on February 17, 1778, put Viennese *Singspiel*, like its prized geological stones, on the map of cultural activities in Europe. Musically diverging from previous German *Singspiele* sung by actors in traveling troupes, the royal company invested in star singers and secured a top-quality orchestra to ensure the venture's success. The libretto lists the four soloists alongside their dramatic roles: Walcher, a mining officer, played by Hr. Fux; Sophie (his ward), played by Mlle Caterina Cavalieri; Fritz, a young miner, played by Hr. Ruprecht; and Zelda, a gypsy, played by Madam Stierle.<sup>13</sup> The main plot concerns the young lovers, Sophie and Fritz, whose union is initially prevented by the older Walcher, who intends to marry Sophie himself. After the lovers thwart Walcher's rendezvous with