

# A fresh look at Mozart—Part 2

## Helmut Perl's The Case of Mozart: Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius

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*This is the second of a two-part series. (See Part 1)*

*Der Fall Mozart. Aussagen über ein missverstandenes Genie (The Case of Mozart: Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius)*, by Helmut Perl, Zürich Mainz 2005

*If virtue and righteousness  
The broad path with glory strews  
Then is the Earth a heavenly kingdom  
And mortals immediately are Gods.*  
(Finale of Act I of *The Magic Flute*.)

Helmut Perl's book—*Aussagen über ein missverstandenes Genie (The Case of Mozart: Testimony about a Misunderstood Genius)*—is also worth reading because the author does not exclude Mozart's political attitudes from a study of his musical works. Perl argues that the composer, in his last two operas of 1791, *The Magic Flute* and *La clemenza di Tito*, brought the program of the Enlightenment to life through music, even after the advent of reactionary policies instituted by the Viennese monarchy.

Other Mozart scholars have already pointed to the Freemasonry symbolism of *The Magic Flute*. Most notable are the three horn blasts heard in the overture, which recall the three hammer blows of the Masonic Lodge's welcome ritual for Apprentices, Journeymen and Master Craftsmen, the repeated use of the number three (three women, three boys), the contrast of night with day and light with dark, the trials of Tamino and Papageno, similar to the Masonic initiation ceremony, and so forth. However, these observations are generally made without analysing the political content of the opera.

Helmut Perl argues that many productions of *The Magic Flute* transform the opera into either a pure fairy-tale or a mystery play. Some even distort the original intentions of Mozart and his librettist Emanuel Schikaneder by portraying Sarastro, for example, as a villain or a demon with his priests appearing in the garb of a clerical order.

The audience in Mozart's day understood very well that *The Magic Flute* was a political piece. The opera's fairy-tale subject matter was necessitated by the increased censorship imposed after the death of Emperor Joseph II in 1790. Perl says the opera "walked a tight-rope between necessary camouflage on the one hand and getting the message across on the other." Anti-feudal statements had to be transformed into harmless events on the stage, something which Schikaneder was able to accomplish with well known elements drawn from Viennese theatre: for example, the figure of Papageno and his similarity to the clown-like figures of Viennese comedy, plot lines such as the transformation of the old woman into a young woman, and the relocation of the story to Ancient Egypt.

Many of the themes treated in the opera make clear that it revolves around the ideas of the Enlightenment. For example, in the original staging the three veiled women emerged onto the stage from a round

Temple, which resembled the façade of a Jesuit church in Rome. Dressed in black hoods like the Capuchin nuns of the Viennese cloisters, the three women would have been immediately recognized by the audience as representatives of the counter-reformation and its clergy. Also relevant in this respect is the opening scene in which the hero Prince Tamino flees a large serpent, an allegory for the original sin which only the church, represented by the three women, can overcome.

Mozart's musical score underscores this meaning. The women sing a confessional absolution in the tone of a liturgical recital: "The Queen hath shown her grace to thee: Abates thy punishment through me" (using the Baroque musical sequence D-F-E-G). This is later parodied musically through repeated affirmations of the necessity to renounce love as Catholic celibacy demands: "Were I to devote my heart to love ... Each would fain be with him alone, with him alone. No, no. No, no. No, no, that cannot be!" The motif "padlock on the mouth" was instantly recognizable as an allusion to the church's censorship of the works of undesirable authors.

The concept of original sin introduced at the opening is contrasted with earthly bliss during the course of the opera. In the second act another theme of the Enlightenment appears. In a dialog between Prince Tamino and Papageno, the latter is portrayed rather negatively and not, as in later productions, as a likeable country-bumpkin.

Papageno has no knowledge of politics and religion and sees his ignorance not as a deficiency, but rather as a necessary subordination. Prince Tamino even has difficulty recognising him as a person. "I don't know if you are human!" The Papageno character is designed to show the immaturity and manipulability of man—recalling to mind Kant's famous imperative: Enlightenment is "man's emergence from his self-inflicted tutelage."

Finally Perl refutes the notion that the Queen of the Night transforms during the opera from good to evil. After the three Ladies have succeeded in inveigling Tamino into taking up the struggle against the "villain" Sarastro, under whose power Pamina has fallen, the Queen of the Night appears on her throne, "adorned by transparent stars." She "appears to the audience in a way known from innumerable reports of supposed apparitions of Mary all over the world." (p. 104)

This means, according to Perl, that the Queen of the Night is none other than Mary herself. She appears less in her role as mother of Christ than as a symbol of the Catholic Church. "This could not have been formulated or portrayed with any other interpretation. The Queen uses the arguments of the clerical literature of the time against the representatives of the Enlightenment: She misses her daughter, i.e. the congregation of true believers. 'An evil fiend, an evil fiend', with emphatic disgust through the rising tones of her voice and that of the orchestra, 'has taken her from me.'" (p.105)

Here too Mozart underscored this interpretation with musical means.

The aria of the Queen of the Night starts at first in the style of church music, and then suddenly bursts into a virtuoso coloratura, with no apparent relevance to the text. Mozart thereby parodies the Italian style of singing, caricaturing the well-intentioned Queen and portraying her in a negative light.

The appearance of Mary on stage was provocative and certainly infuriated the clerical anti-reformers inside Emperor Leopold's state against Mozart. Productions of *The Magic Flute* after Mozart's death have therefore sought to reinterpret this scene and at least in the first act have portrayed the Queen as a good fairy, whose thoughts of murder are aroused only by love for her daughter Pamina.

At the end of the first act, the programmatic direction of *The Magic Flute* becomes clear. The stage directions call for the placing of three temples in a godlike grove—the Temples of Wisdom, Reason and Nature. Here resides Sarastro, probably a depiction of the renowned scientist Ignaz von Born, Master of the Lodge “Zur wahren Eintracht” (For True Harmony), and his priests. The reference to the Enlightenment and its ideals is striking: human society should obey Reason and the laws of Nature instead of adhering to the religiously-based power structure of Absolutism.

In Mozart's lifetime, Immanuel Kant had written *Idea For A Universal History With A Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784), *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), and *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Montesquieu's 1748 work *L'Esprit des Lois* appeared in German in 1782. These works were subjects of discussion by the Illuminati movement in the lodges. *The Magic Flute* seized on these ideas. A truly humane society can only occur when rulers claim no more power than what is necessary for the general well-being of the people. “Then is the Earth a heavenly kingdom, And mortals immediately are Gods,” sings the priestly chorus.

This clearly owes something to the *Social Contract*, which Jean-Jacques Rousseau had put forward as far back as 1762. Kant formulated this concept in his *Idea For A Universal History* as the necessity of “establishing a civil society governed by law.”

Everyone in Vienna knew that Kant had welcomed and defended the French Revolution. The demand for democracy there was growing louder. With the beginning of the Reaction under Emperor Leopold II, it became obvious that it was not possible to reform the absolutist state.

In this situation, the theme of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* was obvious. We share the ideals of the Revolution, but we reject violent acts. “Within these hallowed halls / Man does not know Revenge... Within these hallowed walls / Where men by love do live / No vengeance can lie hidden / We do all sins forgive / Who hath no joy in this fair teaching / Is far beneath man's just deserving.” (Sarastro's Aria, Act II, Scene 12.)

A single article is obviously insufficient to characterise the music of Mozart. His music is in the truest sense of the word inexhaustible. One could say a great deal about Mozart's methods, how he absorbs Baroque forms of composition, sonatas, fugues, recitatives, and so on, and then playfully breaks up these forms. One could point out Mozart's continuous search for new forms of sound, above all in his last years, his inclusion of new instruments like the clarinet, the basset horn, the glass harmonica, and his unusual arrangement of chamber orchestras.

It would also be worthwhile to look at his string quartets, which became a fashionable new genre of music in his time. One could show how the instruments engage equally in a virtual dialogue with each other, throwing each phrase back and forth like a ball, catching and returning them, in other words, translating the democratic program of the Enlightenment and the revolution into the language of music.

What is new and rebellious in Mozart's music? What differentiates it from its Baroque predecessors? What does it contain that engages the attention of the careful listener today?

It is no longer polyphonic Baroque music, which continued to reflect the feudal order and the relationship of man to God. It is also not yet

Romantic music, with its emphasis on the emotions and the solitude of the individual. Mozart and the Viennese classical tradition represented far more the cultural, spiritual and political disintegration of society during the epoch of the bourgeois revolution, the participation of music in the creation of a new, rational and just social order. One can palpably sense Mozart's involvement in this social break-up, the earthliness and immediacy of his music, the optimism and the hope for a new future.

Helmut Perl argues that during Mozart's time, music was “under no circumstances understood just as entertainment. It carried an equal amount of weight as philosophy and the natural sciences, which was discussed and taught in the Masonic Lodges. Music, considered for centuries traditionally part of the discipline of Humaniora, stood henceforth in direct connection with the modern bourgeois emancipation movement, the Enlightenment. Music itself was understood as a medium of the Enlightenment. *The Magic Flute*, the symphonies and his Freemason music all speak the same language. The so-called Vienna classicists were members of Illuminati lodges or, like Beethoven, stood spiritually close to their ideas. (p. 17)

Later in the book Perl makes a further important point: “Europe was in a state of upheaval. The epoch was artistically so productive that it came to be called ‘Classical.’ Today we associate the idea of the Classical with ‘high art,’ but we have also classified such works of art, and those who produced them, as having an ideological and political neutrality. This appears to be a misunderstanding.” (p. 132)

Ekkehart Krippendorff, in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: Ethical Politics from Socrates to Mozart*, characterised such music as programmatic music, as “homage to the Enlightenment.” He argues that the death of Handel in 1759 and Bach in 1750 signified the end of the binding connection between culture and Christianity. Music had to find a new orientation on the basis of a “bourgeois religion of Reason and Humanity,” which would bring “complexity, but also the richness and all-sidedness, the multi-dimensionality of the newly discovered and newly experienced humanity into its language.”

It is exactly this which is fascinating in Mozart's music. It is incredibly multi-faceted, human, rebellious, liberating and comprehensible to everyone. Perhaps we are better placed today to comprehend the progressive nature of his music under conditions where a change of the current order and the creation of a new, just and humane society have become urgent tasks.

*Concluded*



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