

Overture to the Opera *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), K. 620 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (Born 1756 - Died 1791)

In an age of powdered wigs and gold carriages, Johannes Chrysostomus Wolfgangus Theophilus Amadeus Gottlieb Sigismundus Mozart-(wait, I have to stop and catch my breath for a moment...okay)-was living a musical life that seemed to race ahead like a DVD in fast-forward mode. Perhaps he somehow knew that a long stay on earth just wasn't in the cards. He was born in the mountains of Salzburg, Austria in 1756 to Anna Maria and Leopold Mozart. He and his sister Nannerl were the only two among seven children to survive infancy.

If one were to say that Mozart was a composer whose genius was unequalled, even that would be an understatement. As fast as he could think, he could compose music. Down to the smallest detail, his writing was complete perfection, and to this day scholars scratch their heads in amazement when they consider the amount of music he wrote and the speed with which he did so. However, while it is true that Mozart was among the greatest musical prodigies who ever lived, that is not why the world holds him in its heart centuries after his death. We remember him as a man whose music is unsurpassed in lyric beauty and seemingly effortless melodic line.

Mozart's love affair with music started in very early childhood. Before his fourth birthday, his family realized his musical memory and aural sophistication were extraordinary. He started to play first the violin, then the harpsichord. He needed so little guidance it was as if he had always known how. Don't get me wrong, Nannerl was a fine musician, but her little brother was, well, really quite something else.

At the age of five, Mozart would practice by candlelight, by six he was already inventing musical themes of his own, which his father would feverishly scratch down on manuscript paper. Only a short time after, Mozart would take over the notation himself. By the time he could reach the pedals of the clavier, he was already a keyboardist of virtuoso proportions. He was not without personality either. On a visit to Vienna, Mozart made an appearance before the Empress Theresa. He tripped and fell to the floor, and the Empress's daughter, Marie Antoinette, (only two months older than his six years) helped him to his feet. Right away, he proposed to marry her. I guess she waited for a better offer.

His father then took his children (Nannerl was ten by then) to Munich, where they performed before many illustrious dignitaries. In fact, between the ages of seven and fifteen, Mozart spent about half his time on tour. He would demonstrate for the courts and the public his ability to improvise and sight-read, and he would entertain them with his musical tricks.

Mozart is probably the only composer in history to have written masterworks in almost every musical genre. In addition to forty-one symphonies, he dreamed up serenades, divertimenti and dances, written on request for the nobility. He created vocal and choral music of unparalleled beauty, organ and piano music, music for the church.

He composed sixteen operas, the first one at the age of 12, and the last, the glorious *Magic Flute*, written in the year of his death. We will hear the *Overture* to this great work on tonight's program.

With all his great skill, eagerness and dedication, one would logically think that Mozart should have an exceptionally successful career. In addition, he thought so too. Excited and ready for what would come his way, he and his mother traveled to Munich and Paris in 1777 to scope out his prospects. However, his mother died suddenly in Paris in 1778, and Mozart was jobless. He returned to Salzburg in great sadness. After several frustrating years as the court organist to the Archbishop in Salzburg, he resigned and became one of the first musicians to take on a free-lance career.

He moved to Vienna in 1781, where he met Haydn, who came to love him as his own son, and had great reverence for his talents. Mozart stayed with his old family friends, the Webers, and fell in love with their 17-year-old daughter, Aloisia. Unfortunately, she was already hitched, so Mozart turned his attentions to their third daughter, Constanze, whom he married a year later. Things looked bright for a while. He turned out one masterpiece after another in every form imaginable. He became a regular at the court of Emperor Joseph II, where he wrote much of his greatest music, of which the last ten string quartets, the *Quintet for Clarinet and Strings*, the *Mass in C minor*, the unfinished *Requiem*, the late piano concertos and the last six symphonies, are just a sampling.

But, the year 1788 brought misery to Mozart, then 32 years old. His wife was not in good health, his medical bills were high, and Theresia, their infant daughter died. In addition, the cultural climate in Vienna changed. Mozart was no longer the darling of the public he had once been. Having no secure position, he had to rely on students and commissions, neither of which was widely available at the time. Then word came that Leopold died, and it was as if a part of Mozart had passed with him.

In the face of all these events came the creation of his wonderful *G Minor Symphony No. 40*, in July, 1788. Ironically, the darkness Mozart felt and the lack of Classical convention made the symphony popular even when Mozart was otherwise being shut out by the Romantics. But fortune would never be his. In 1791, Mozart was commissioned to write a requiem. He was by that time gravely ill and imagined that the work was for himself, which it did prove to be. This work stands alongside Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* as the supreme example of vocal music. His death at only 35 years old, gave rise to false rumors of poisoning, though it is thought to have resulted from kidney failure. After a modest funeral at Saint Stephen's Cathedral, he was buried in an unmarked grave at the cemetery of Saint Marx.

Let's turn now to *Die Zauberflöte*, (*The Magic Flute*.) The summer of 1791 was a particularly tense time for Mozart. He had run out of money and he was worried about his wife's health. People were not exactly turning cartwheels over his music as they once had. But, even so, his letters are full of the things that made him cheerful—having a delightful summer house in which to compose, eating an appetizing dish of sturgeon, sending off-color jokes his music students and addressing the mice who were keeping him awake. And, it is Mozart's love of ordinary things (and ordinary people) that comes across in *The Magic Flute*. So when old friend Emanuel Schikaneder, an actor, singer, librettist, (you name it, he was a big man in the theater) suggested that they get together on a new opera that had great possibilities, Mozart, although physically feeble, was quite definitely listening. After all, writing music was like breathing to Mozart, and he could still do *that*. It was to be his last opera and his only opera in his native German language. The opera is a *singspiel*, a form of opera made up of both vocal music and spoken dialogue. It had its well-received premiere in Vienna in the late summer of 1791. Unfortunately, Mozart had little time to bask in his glory—he died only two months later.

The Magic Flute is a multi-layered phenomenon. There have been countless doctoral dissertations written about it, but at the same time, it is so brimming with fairy tale and imagination that it can be enjoyed by young people as well. It is captivating enough for those new to opera to be swept away, but then its plot has such complexity that staunch opera enthusiasts need to see it repeatedly to make sense out of the characters and their motivations.

Haydn introduced Mozart to Freemasonry, and Mozart, as well as many other intellectuals of the time, became a Mason. This opera is full of the ideas and ideals that Masons embrace, i.e., self-sufficiency of the individual, the concepts of power, wisdom and beauty and many of the symbols of the Masons, such as aprons, hammers, the pyramid with an all-seeing eye, etc. Of course, this affords the average Mozart scholar much to analyze. The melodies of the work range from folksy tunes to elaborate arias, to music sublime enough for characters like the Priest of the Sun. The fairly short answer to "what's it about?" is the following:

Prince Tamino, who hears that Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night, has been kidnapped by the wicked Sarastro, goes to Sarastro's palace, accompanied by Papageno, a bird catcher, with the aim of rescuing her. Tamino is told by Sarastro, who is actually a virtuous high-ranking priest, that in order to save Pamina from captivity, he has to overcome various trials imposed upon him. He valiantly faces the tests and successfully surmounts them. The vicious world dominated by the Queen of the Night is completely destroyed.

We will hear the *Overture* to this great work this evening. The score calls for two each of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoon, horns, trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings. It was composed at the end of Mozart's work on the opera, and apparently didn't get into the players' hands until the day of the dress rehearsal. After a slow and formal opening section, with fanfares in the trombones introducing the domain of the priestly Sarastro, comes an abrupt change—a rhythmic fugue which boldly forges ahead at an *Allegro* tempo marking. The main theme here is turned around and upside down and successfully thrown to the winds, who toss it back to the strings. We have short stretches of slow and deliberate intervention here and there, but the fugue keeps recurring in ingenious ways. This seems to allude to the dramatic tribulations of the characters as they make their way through the opera. So, Mozart imports a traditionally Baroque device and deftly drops it into a Classical overture. Not only does this work like a charm musically, but the technique also suggests all the chaos that ensues within the plot of the opera. Of course both the opera and the *Overture* culminate in a "happily ever after" resolution.

- Claudia Drosen