

SYNOPSIS

Background

Two realms oppose each other in *The Magic Flute*: the realm of the Queen of the Night and that of Sarastro, who is both the secular and spiritual ruler of his territory. The Queen of the Night has considered Sarastro as her enemy ever since her late husband, shortly before his death, had voluntarily handed over the circle of the sun, which granted him the power to rule, to Sarastro. Pamina, the Queen of the Night's only child, has been abducted by Sarastro, who is holding her captive in his temple precinct.

Act One

The young Prince Tamino, fleeing from a dangerous snake, loses his way in a region between 'valleys and mountains'. As the snake closes in on him, he faints. When he wakes up, he finds the snake dead at his feet. Three Ladies from the Queen of the Night's entourage killed it and have rushed to the palace to inform her about the unexpected arrival of the handsome stranger. A strange creature clothed in feathers approaches Tamino; it is Papageno, the bird catcher who regularly supplies the Queen of the Night's palace. Tamino thanks him effusively for saving him, and Papageno, overcome by his gratitude, claims that he strangled the snake himself. At that moment the Three Ladies return at the behest of the Queen, punish Papageno for lying by placing a padlock on his mouth, and present Tamino with a portrait of the kidnapped Pamina. Upon seeing the portrait, Tamino falls in love for the first time and announces his intention to rescue Pamina. The Queen of the Night then appears and promises him her daughter's hand in marriage if he succeeds in freeing her from Sarastro's castle. The padlock is removed from Papageno's mouth on condition that he never tells lies again, and he is to assist Tamino in his attempt to rescue Pamina. On behalf of the Queen the Three Ladies present them with two instruments which have magical powers to protect them in times of danger: Tamino receives a flute, and Papageno a glockenspiel. As they take their leave, the Three Ladies announce that Three Boys (the original libretto refers to them as 'Three Genies') will show them

the way – however, as Papageno later complains, they appear much later than expected. Papageno und Tamino therefore arrive at Sarastro's residence separately.

Unrest prevails there: Pamina had taken advantage of an unguarded moment to escape, much to the slaves' delight, who pity her fate. However, the rough supervisor Manostatos has recaptured her and wants to put her in chains. She faints; Manostatos sends the slaves away so as to be alone with her. At that moment Papageno appears, having entered the usually carefully guarded grounds without any difficulty. Both Manostatos and Papageno are startled by the unexpected sight of one another, and Manostatos runs away. Papageno uses the portrait that Tamino gave him to identify Pamina. She recognizes Papageno as one of her mother's emissaries and, after initial hesitation, she follows him when he tells her about Prince Tamino's love for her. The opportunity to flee together seems ideal, as Sarastro is out hunting. Pamina feels sympathy for Papageno, who dreams in vain of finding a companion.

Meanwhile, Tamino has also reached Sarastro's temple district with the help of the Three Boys who urge him to be 'steadfast, patient and close-lipped'. He is rejected by a voice at the Temple of Reason and the Temple of Nature, but the door to the Temple of Wisdom opens up to him. Through the conversation with the guard, Tamino gradually realizes that Sarastro is not the inhuman tyrant he had been made out to be. However, Tamino will only discover the truth once the 'hand of friendship' leads him into the sanctuary. He is at least relieved to learn that Pamina is still alive. With his pan flute, Papageno responds to Tamino's flute tones, which are capable even of taming wild animals. Before Pamina and Papageno can reach Tamino, they are surprised by Manostatos. Papageno's glockenspiel with its magic power protects them from being captured, but at that moment Sarastro returns from the hunt, celebrated by his subjects. He forgives Pamina, who confesses that she tried to escape. Manostatos then leads in Tamino. Pamina and Tamino recognize each other and fall into each other's arms but are immediately separated again by Manostatos. Much to his surprise,

Sarastro punishes Manostatos for his actions instead of being rewarded as he had hoped. The two strangers, Tamino and Papageno, are led into the temple to undergo the initiates' trials.

Act Two

Sarastro presides over the assembly of priests, which he describes as particularly important: Tamino wants to lift the veil of darkness and behold the light of the sanctuary. In order to do so, he requires the support of the priests. Pamina and Tamino are said to be destined for each other. A Speaker of the priests voices his doubts about Tamino's powers. Sarastro dismisses these doubts and entrusts the two strangers to him so that they can undergo the trials. The Speaker first asks Tamino, then Papageno, whether they are prepared to fight for their goals, even if it means risking their lives. Whereas Tamino is prepared to subject himself to any trial to gain wisdom and earn Pamina's hand in marriage, Papageno says that fighting is not his forte and that he would be happy to content himself with 'sleep, food, and drink.' The priests make it clear that he will not find the companion he longs for unless he undergoes the trials. Initially, Papageno therefore announces that he would rather stay single. But when he learns that Sarastro has chosen a girl for him who is 'just like' him, he becomes curious and agrees to the trials.

The first trial is to not speak to women. The Three Ladies appear unexpectedly in the temple during the night. While Tamino remains silent, he barely manages to keep Papageno from answering the Three Ladies' questions. Some priests emerge, and the Ladies disappear underground amid thunder and lightning.

Meanwhile, Pamina is asleep in a garden pavilion; she is being watched in the moonlight by Manostatos, who wants to steal a kiss from her. Suddenly, her mother, the Queen of the Night, appears. She questions Pamina about the young man whom she sent to rescue her and learns that he wants to join the initiates. The Queen gives Pamina a dagger and threatens to disown her if she does not kill Sarastro and hand over the powerful circle of the sun before dawn. The young man would then also be lost to her and the world.

Manostatos, who had been eavesdropping the conversation, takes the dagger from Pamina as soon as the Queen of the Night disappears. He tries to convince her that the only way to save herself and her mother from Sarastro's fury would be to love him. When Pamina vehemently refuses, Manostatos attempts to stab her but is prevented by Sarastro, who sees through Manostatos' excuses but nevertheless sends him away unpunished. Manostatos decides to join forces with the Queen of the Night. Pamina begs mercy for her mother. Sarastro explains that revenge is unknown in these 'sacred halls', and that her mother's only punishment will be to return to her castle in shame once Tamino has passed the trials and found happiness with Pamina.

In the meantime the trials continue. Tamino remains silent while Papageno, out of curiosity and boredom, strikes up a conversation with an old woman who gives him a jug of water. As she is about to reveal her name, she is banished by a thunderclap. Papageno promises Tamino that he will never say another word.

The Three Boys appear again, this time on Sarastro's orders. They return Tamino's magic flute and Papageno's glockenspiel and serve food which, however, only Papageno starts to eat. Pamina has followed the sound of Tamino's flute, but he refuses to speak to her, mindful of his vow. When Pamina asks Papageno to explain her beloved's strange behaviour, he refuses to interrupt his meal, and she leaves in distress. The next trials are about to begin: Sarastro leads Pamina in so that Tamino can say a final farewell to her. At the same time he announces that they will be able to see each other again.

Meanwhile, Papageno is alone, lamenting his fate. The Speaker pronounces him unworthy of the heavenly pleasures reserved for the initiates. Papageno is, however, content with earthly life and desires only a glass of wine, which is granted to him. The little song he sings to the accompaniment of the glockenspiel entices the old woman back again. When he promises to be faithful to her – at least until he finds someone prettier – she is transformed into a young woman. As Papageno tries to embrace his Papagena, the Speaker bursts in and quickly leads her away, for Papageno is not yet worthy of her.

The Three Boys announce that the trials will soon be completed. But they see Pamina, who believes that Tamino has spurned her and wants to commit suicide using her mother's dagger. Together they convince her that Tamino loves no one but her, and want to take her to him. Two armoured men lead Tamino to the two final, life-threatening trials. Pamina calls him back, and Tamino is now allowed to speak to her. She is permitted to undergo the trials together with him, as a woman who 'fears neither night nor death' is worthy of initiation. With the protection of the magic flute, Pamina and Tamino pass the trials of fire and water, and are triumphantly welcomed by Sarastro's retinue.

Meanwhile, Papageno is wandering around trying to find Papagena, who has captured his heart. When he cannot find her, he decides to hang himself. But he too is saved by the Three Boys, who urge him to use his glockenspiel. While Papageno plays it, they summon Papagena. Now nothing can keep Papageno and Papagena apart, and they dream of a future together with a host of children.

The Queen of the Night and the Three Ladies, led by Manostatos, have entered the premises with the intention of killing the initiates. In exchange for his help, the Queen has promised Manostatos her daughter's hand in marriage. However, their scheme is foiled by thunder, lightning and a storm. Nothing stands in the way of Pamina and Tamino's future happiness.

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