



## **Opera on the Lake 2014**

### **Fantasy spectacle with a message**

#### **Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute* on the lake stage**

Even though *The Magic Flute* is well known to every opera lover, the work never fails to fascinate because of its mix of popularity and profundity. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's worldwide hit has now been put on at the Bregenz Festival on the lake stage in a highly insightful production by artistic director David Pountney, who leaves the festival in 2014. It's a shrewd choice because the last time the opera was produced at Bregenz – in 1985, when it was directed by Jérôme Savary – it marked the beginning of a new era. From that point on, it was only serious operas in elaborate and imaginative productions that were presented on the lake stage. The festival gained an international reputation and became a top story with regular newspaper and television coverage.

And yet this hugely popular Mozart opera is actually about a very weighty subject: "man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity". That's how the philosopher Immanuel Kant defined the miracle of the Enlightenment just a few years before *The Magic Flute* received its premiere performance, in Vienna in 1791. The imperative of deciding for oneself, of using one's own understanding, tolerance and humanity can also be found in the intelligent libretto which the actor and impresario Emanuel Schikaneder wrote for the opera. What starts out apparently as a fairy tale – with Prince Tamino's quest for the King's abducted daughter Pamina – turns into a journey of discovery between good and evil, the realm of light and the realm of night. Magic powers are warded off by wisdom. Trials must be successfully endured. Three mysterious boys accompany Tamino on the journey. And the characters, moreover, are conceived in a deliberately ambivalent way: the evil Queen of the Night, Pamina's mother, is in fact, in her despair, somebody we sympathise with; while the good priest Sarastro, on whose orders Pamina was abducted, turns out to be a moralising know-it-all who even leaves his pretty hostage to the mercy of his lusting, brutal slave Monostatos.



So, *The Magic Flute* is about much more than just the foreground action. What we see is two young people finding themselves. The make-believe tale becomes a reflection of reality. When the opera was composed, Europe was in a new age ushered in by the French Revolution. All-powerful monarchs of absolutist mould – symbolised by the Queen of the Night – were soon to be a thing of the past. The strengthened citizenry, for its part, subscribed to pseudo-religious virtues and values heavily indebted to Freemasonry – symbolised by the priest Sarastro – and found itself in a straitjacket of ritual. It is to the young couple Tamino and Pamina, who embrace as the opera closes, that the future belongs. Where, though, does that lead? For stage-director Pountney, the two young people are "the representatives of the new order, an enlightened world order, who have no need of the superfluous hierarchies and superstition of monarchs and priests or of their antiquated musical mannerisms". Mozart, after all, very deliberately makes the Queen of the Night and the priest Sarastro sing in a backward-looking musical style, whereas the two young people are given arias in the modern, psychological idiom of "Empfindsamkeit" (Sentimentalism).

So that the plot would not be too serious throughout, Schikaneder, the author of the libretto, created the character of the bird-catcher Papageno, whom he played himself. He is a cheerful man of simple needs and has the most common sense of all. With an apt saying or a ditty always on his lips, he was a darling of the public from the very first performances of *The Magic Flute*. Papageno is a character people identify with, and a maverick that goes his own way. The sect-like behaviour of Sarastro's priests and the rigmarole of their trials are suspect to him. Shortly before the end he simply drops out and starts a family with his sweetheart Papagena.

The Bregenz Festival production sets the opera in a brightly coloured world of fantasy. Flanked by three towering "dragon dogs" the action takes place on the back of a tortoise shell with long blades of grass growing on it. For stage designer Johan Engels, this symbolises the "forest of life". At Bregenz it's the first time that a revolving stage and a carousel track running under water have been used on the lake stage – a visual spectacle that would surely have delighted the librettist Schikaneder, since he enjoyed devising extravagant stage effects for *The Magic Flute*. This aspect makes the opera ideal for the lake stage, according to artistic director Pountney: "Mozart and Schikaneder



perfectly understood the opportunities that good entertainment can afford to communicate with an audience, and at the same time they made no compromises at all when it came to presenting their theatre as a theatre of ideas that addressed the central humanistic and rational questions of the Enlightenment." This approach also provides a key to the fairy-tale stage set with its tall grasses. As Pountney says, "when the forests of complexity get too dark and dense for the human mind, culture stimulates the imagination to find a way out in dreams, and to make dreams come true". This is another way the ever topical story of *The Magic Flute* can be interpreted.

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The 2014 Bregenz Festival runs from 23 July to 25 August 2014. For tickets and information, call +43 (0)5574 407-6 or visit [www.bregenzerfestspiele.com](http://www.bregenzerfestspiele.com).