

Preview**CIM's *Magic Flute*: insights
from director David Bamberger**

by Daniel Hathaway



CIM Opera Theater director David Bamberger has chosen Mozart's *The Magic Flute* for its fall production in Kulas Hall at the Cleveland Institute of Music, which runs from Wednesday, November 6 through Saturday, November 9, with a 7:30 pm curtain time each night. The production is double-cast (Wednesday-Friday and Thursday-Saturday) and will be sung in the original German with English super-titles.

Weighed down by enough symbolism to give Dan Brown material for a thick new book, *Flute* also calls for a stratospheric (and scary) soprano to play the Queen of the Night, a *basso profundo* to play Sarastro and a charismatic baritone to play the birdcatcher, Papageno. We reached David Bamberger by telephone last week to talk about the production. He began by musing about the character of the evil sorcerer,

Sarastro.

David Bamberger: I have a big problem with Sarastro. I know that Shaw said his music sounds the way God ought to sound, but everything he actually says, if you go by the words rather than the tunes, is actually untrue. Or inept.

He claims to be all-knowing and in control of everything, but he seems to miss the point that Monostatos is probably the last person in the repertoire one would want to entrust an innocent young girl to. Well, maybe Scarpia's the exception — but he's also completely unfair to him, because Pamina escapes, Monostatos captures her and says to Sarastro, look what a good job I did because I was following instructions. Whereupon Sarastro says he'll be beaten for it.

Of course, he's horrendously sexist, which is not merely a century problem — I'm not blaming Sarastro for not having 21st century sensibilities — but in terms of the opera it makes no sense because the Queen and the Ladies are the custodians of the flute and the bells and it is Pamina who tells the tenor, if you want to survive the trials Sarastro is putting you through, use the flute. So the tenor says, Oh, there's a good idea. Then Sarastro in *Diese heil'gen Hallen* says, We don't do revenge here, whereupon he obliterates the Queen and the three Ladies.

So I really have a big problem with him, and what I see in this opera is the progression of the young people to ultimately finding their own way and replacing the older generation. While the show can be done — and it's very pretty — with Sarastro at the end as kind of a Christ figure bringing together Pamina and Pamino, and surveying his wonderful domain to which he has brought peace, righteousness and the American way of life, I just don't do that. So the Queen and Sarastro are on their way out at the end and it's time for the younger generation. Maybe at this time in my life I'm particularly sensitive to that, but anyhow, I also teach in a school full of young people.

The way we visualize this is that the stage looks like an abandoned disco or an out-of-date night club. Kids sneak in and put on a show with what they find there. If you were to listen on the radio you'd have no idea of the concept. I don't know if you're into Joseph Campbell, but in *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, he talks about the young hero who goes through the darkness to fight the dragon — like *Star Wars* or Jesus, or Moses, or Mohammed or St. Anthony — a rite of passage that ends like the finale of *Idomeneo* when the old order passes away for the new.

Mozart himself was ambivalent about his relationship with the older generation — his father in particular but also characters like the Commendatore, Bartolo in *Figaro*, Selim in *Seraglio*, Alfonso — all those senior, bassy figures.

DH: Why do you think Magic Flute is such a popular opera?

DB: Well, Mozart was a fairly talented composer to begin with. And Schikaneder, who wrote the libretto and starred in the opera, made sure that Papageno would get the girl and steal the show. There are a lot of really fun and inspiring and beautiful things in the piece. Ultimately, it's a good story with good tunes.

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