Die Zauberflöte: What's in a Title?

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Scholars have argued over Die Zauberflöte for many years. Is it a fairy-tale opera, a metaphorical discussion of Masonic and Rosicrucian beliefs, or a contemporary political or philosophical commentary on the 1780s and the Enlightenment? It can be all these and more, but for many in the audience during fall 1791 it was entertainment, pure and simple. The audience at the Theater auf der Weiden came from all levels of society. The nobility and educated attended as well as the working and servant classes.

In a work so rich with literary, visual, and musical symbols, it is easy to gloss over the most obvious ones: the magical musical instruments. Musical instruments of Mozart’s day were similar in some ways to instruments in common use today yet quite different in construction, sound, and performance techniques. As performers and conductors try to communicate music of past centuries, they have turned in recent years to performing music on the instruments for which the composers wrote the music, using either surviving instruments or modern reconstructions in an attempt to recreate the timbres or tone colors, tempi, ornamentation, tunings, and the like of the past.

This essay focuses primarily on Mozart’s use of two instruments: the Zauberflöte (magic flute) and the Zauberglöckchen (magic bells). We know what a flute is and what bells are, but why and how are they “magic”? In fact, why do Schikaneder and Mozart use these instruments at specific times in the work, and what meanings did they convey to Mozart’s audience? We will also discuss several surviving instruments that could have influenced Mozart’s music.
Papageno’s Panpipe

The first unusual instrument we hear is a little panpipe (Faunen-Flötchen) played by Papageno (fig. 1) in his aria “Der Vogelfänger bin ich ja” (1.2). This is not a magic instrument but an aid Papageno uses to attract the birds he trades to the Three Ladies, emissaries of the Queen of the Night, in return for food, drink, and shelter. The bird catcher Papageno, in the service of the Queen of the Night, is a man of the people, a child of nature, someone with whom those of the lower social classes in the audience could easily and immediately identify. Schikaneder played this role and the panpipe to the delight of his audience.

Mozart’s music here is airy and earthy; the ascending five-note motive of the panpipe is Papageno’s musical motive (example 1). The strophic song, written in G major, a key often associated with the “rustic, idyllic and lyrical,” aptly portrays Papageno’s pastoral origins.
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The introduction of the Zauberflöte and the Zauberglockchen comes after the Three Ladies show Tamino a portrait of Pamina (1.3) and tell him of the capture of Pamina by a powerful evil demon (1.5). The Queen of the Night then enters amid thunder as the mountain parts, revealing her seated on a star-studded throne. She promises Tamino that he can marry Pamina if he will rescue her from the villain (1.6). Before Tamino and Papageno leave on their rescue mission, the Three Ladies first give Tamino a gift from the Queen: a goldene Flöte (fig. 2) for his protection from the greatest misfortune. The flute has not undergone enchantment, but its “magic” is that it can foster enchantment. The Three Ladies further explain that with the flute Tamino “can act omnipotently, transform human passion, make the sad joyful” and “through love captivate even an old bachelor” (1.10). Then all sing that the flute is “worth more than gold or crowns for through it the happiness and contentment of mankind will be increased.”

In his thought-provoking article “Layers of Meaning in The Magic Flute,” Joscelyn Godwin reminds us that the “flute itself is a many-layered
symbol. It is phallic, of course, and as such represents the virility which is lacking in Tamino at the outset, but which is a vital quality on the Quest.”

He then quotes Jacques Chailley: “[The flute’s] symbolism is that of music itself: to carry out his journey of purification, man needs aid from rites that give him the power to transform souls, and music is the most essential sign of them.”

This of course immediately recalls the Greek myth of Orpheus, the musician who could charm wild beasts and move trees and rocks from their places by the sound of his music. After the death of his beloved Eurydice, he charmed the ferryman Charon, the dog Cerberus, the three Judges of the Dead, and even Hades with his singing and lyre playing. Orpheus’s music moves Hades, and Hades allows Eurydice to return to the world of the living if Orpheus does not look back until she is again in the sunlight.

Godwin quotes further “the Sufi poet Mevlana Jalalu’ddin Rumi, founder of the esoteric Islamic order of Whirling Dervishes, who dance to the music of reed-flutes (nays): ‘First [the flute] is cut away from its original stem. Then in its heart the holes have been made; and since the holes have been made in the heart, the heart has been broken, and it begins to cry.’”

We find out much later in the opera who made the flute (2.28). Along with Tamino, we learn from Pamina that the flute does not really come from her mother, the Queen of the Night, but that her father, Sarastro’s predecessor as master of the sevenfold sun circle, made it. A pivotal point in the libretto, Tamino and Pamina are at last united and will undergo the last trials together. As they are about to enter the trial of fire, Pamina takes Tamino by the hand and says:

Love may strew the path with roses, because roses always come with thorns. You play the magic flute; may it protect us on our way. My father carved it in a magic hour from the deepest heart of a thousand-year-old oak, amid lightning, thunder, storm, and tumult. Now, come and play the flute, may it lead us on our rocky way.

Chailley points out that the flute is “destined for use under the sign of Air (man’s breath), it has been produced magically during a stormy night under a downpour (Water), to the noise of thunder (Earth) and the flash of lightning (Fire). It unites the four Elements, whence its perfection.”

Godwin suggests that “the flute is Tamino’s purified heart, in which divine happiness wells up [2.15], and which with Pamina’s support, gives him the power to pass the trials [2.28].”

Our first indication of the flute’s Orphic power to transform feelings and animals comes toward the end of act 1, scene 15. Tamino, informed by a priest who comes out of the Temple that Pamina still lives, takes out his flute and sings in recitative style before he plays: “Oh, if with every tone I
Temino plays his flute upon learning that Pamina lives; animals come and listen to its sound (1.15, mm. 160–67).

were only able, almighty ones, in your honor to describe my thanks, which sprang from heart [he points to his heart].” Now in the key of C major, a key of purity, simplicity, and childlike innocence, Tamino plays the Zauberflöte (example 2), charming all types of wild animals accompanied by the twittering of birds. Tamino continues his song: “How powerful is your magic sound, charming flute, for through your sound even wild animals feel joy. But only Pamina stays away.” He calls her name, seemingly in vain, then plays again, pleading for her to hear him, answer him. Papageno’s panpipe echoes the last five notes of Tamino’s flute, an ascending G major scale (example 3). Tamino exclaims, “That is Papageno’s sound!” After two more repetitions of the flute answered by the panpipes, Tamino, his hopes raised, sings, “Perhaps the sound will lead me to her!” as he rushes off stage. In the next scene, Papageno and Pamina, escaping from the Temple, sing of their hope that Tamino will find them. Papageno again plays his panpipe, and Tamino answers offstage on his flute. At that moment, Monostatos discovers Pamina and Papageno.

It is at this point that Papageno realizes that his panpipe is not viable against Monostatos.
The Zauberglockchen

Let us return to Papageno when the Three Ladies first give him the Zauberglockchen (1.8, mm. 171–72). In the score, Mozart wrote, “Gibt ihm ein stahlnes Gelächter” (literally, “give him a steel laughter”). In the printed libretto, the instruction is “Gibt ihm eine Maschine wie ein hölzernes Gelächter” (literally, “Give him a machine like a wooden laughter or amusement”). The phrase “hölzernes Gelächter,” which may be a corruption of “hiiltzig Glechter” (wooden sticks), was used until the late eighteenth century to refer to a folk xylophone, often a single trapezoidal row of wooden bars. The Three Ladies, however, give Papageno a box inside of which is what they call (1.8, mm. 184–85) silber Glockchen (little silver bells). Papageno and Tamino, now armed with their Zauberinstrumenten, begin their quest.

Papageno’s first opportunity to use his Glockchen occurs shortly after Pamina and Papageno hear Tamino’s flute played offstage. They are now overjoyed at the prospect of being saved when Monostatos and his slaves suddenly confront them. Papageno then shows that he is not entirely the fool. “He who often risks much often wins much! Come you pretty glockenspiel, let your little chimes sound so that their ears ring!” Monostatos and the slaves then begin to dance as they exit (1.17, example 4).

Godwin suggests that in this scene Papageno charms Monostatos through the power of music, “which symbolizes the fundamental goodness of simple folk.” After they leave, Papageno and Pamina sing, “If every good man could find such bells! His enemies would then disappear without trouble, and without them he would live in the best harmony! Only harmony and friendship lightens our burden; without this sympathy there is no happiness on earth.” Konrad Küster, however, states, “The glockenspiel has not yet implanted itself in Papageno’s consciousness—or rather he has not yet fully grasped that he has left his old identity behind and acquired a new one.”

Example 4. Papageno plays the Zauberglockchen while Monostatos and his slaves dance as they exit the stage (1.17, mm. 294–301).
EXAMPLE 5. Papageno, *Zauberbüchlein* introduction to the first verse of “Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen” (2.23, mm. 1–8).

In act 2, scene 23, Papageno sings his aria “Mädchen oder Weibchen.” Mozart writes a virtuosic part for the *Glöckchen* (example 5). Schikaneder played Papageno in some performances, using a mute stage prop instrument while someone else played an actual instrument in the wings. Whether it was a small keyboard-like instrument in the box given him by the Three Ladies or a bell tree (fig. 3) that he hit with sticks or spun around (singers who have played the part have used all these and more), it is this aria that Mozart describes in his October 8–9 letter to his wife, Constanze:

But during Papageno’s aria with the glockenspiel I went behind the scenes, as I felt a sort of impulse to-day to play it myself. Well, just for fun, at the point where Schikaneder has a pause [perhaps m. 35], I played an arpeggio. He was startled, looked behind the wings and saw me. When he had his next pause, I played no arpeggio. This time he stopped and refused to go on. I guessed what he was thinking and again played a chord. He then...

struck the glockenspiel and said ‘Shut up.’ Whereupon everyone laughed. I am inclined to think that this joke taught many of the audience for the first time that Papageno does not play the instrument himself. By the way, you have no idea how charming the music sounds when you hear it from a box close to the orchestra—it sounds much better than from the gallery. As soon as you return—you must try this for yourself.29

The third time Papageno uses his bells is when he wants to find Papagena again (1.29). He first tries his panpipe unsuccessfully: she does not appear. He then tries to hang himself but stops at the last minute at the reappearance of the Three Boys, who remind him to use his Glöckchen. He then sings “Klinget Glöckchen klinget” followed by the humorous duet in which Papagena and he stutter joyously on the first syllable of their names (example 6).

Much speculation surrounds exactly what sort of instrument Papageno plays, both on stage by the singer and offstage by a musician. On stage he might have played a small bell tree that he takes out of the box given him by the Three Ladies, or perhaps he played a set of metal bars (fig. 4).30 Today from backstage or in the orchestra the Zauberglöckchen music is usually performed on a

Fig. 4. Metal, trapezoidal glockenspiel in a wooden case, eighteenth century, incomplete diatonic scale g to d², possibly used as a stage instrument. No one knows exactly what sort of instrument Papageno’s portrayers played in the eighteenth century. On stage they might have played a small bell tree (fig. 3) or a set of metal bars like these. Courtesy of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Sammlung alter Musikinstrumente, Inv. Nr. 264. Also reproduced in Stradner, Klangwelt, 316.
celesta, an instrument played like a small upright piano in which small hammers strike metal bars. This instrument was not patented, however, until 1886.

What type of instrument did Mozart intend in 1791? In the score, Mozart uses the term *istromento d’acciaio* ("instrument of steel"). Until recently, scholars knew no such instrument from the eighteenth century. In 1999, however, Gerhard Stradner published an important article in which he describes a musical clock built by 1745 and given to the Empress Maria Theresia in 1750 to celebrate her tenth year on the throne. On examining the musical clock, Stradner unexpectedly found inside it another instrument, a separate keyboard glockenspiel of four chromatic octaves (C to c\textsuperscript{3}, pitched a\textsuperscript{1} = 410 Hz) (fig. 5). Since the instrument is in fragile condition and does not play, it could not be completely opened to see if it had metal plates or bars or rods. One can only speculate whether or not Mozart knew of this clock and its hidden instrument. That such instruments did exist is now beyond question. In at least one recent production of *Die Zauberflöte*, moreover, an instrument maker reconstructed a special *istromento d’acciaio*.

Jeremy Montagu proposes an interesting possibility for another metal instrument. We do not know whether Mozart’s steel instrument used...
metal bars, rods, or small bells that might be struck with a small hammer attached to a keyboard mechanism. Montagu informs us that an instrument similar to Benjamin Franklin’s hemispherical cup bells, but played with small mallets attached to a keyboard, exists in the Museum of Rosenborg Castle in Denmark, and, according to Mette Müller, “The instrument suited the purpose [Mozart’s music] well.”

Nevertheless, yet another possibility is that Mozart in his arrangements of Handel’s music in the late 1780s became aware that Handel used a keyboard instrument, called by Handel a carillon, that struck metal bars or bells from a keyboard. In 1788, Mozart arranged Handel’s masque Acis and Galatea, basing it on the published score of 1743. Regrettably, that score did not include the carillon part written in 1739.

The Zauberglockchen could also be an instrument with glass bars, such as the one pictured here (fig. 6). Built by Beyer in Paris in 1785, this “Glasschord” has a range from g to g and may be similar in size to the instrument used in Die Zauberflöte. Small wooden hammers strike the glass bars when the keys are depressed. Other glass instruments from the eighteenth century are not likely candidates since Mozart’s music for his
Istrumento d’acciaio is much too elaborate to be played on Franklin’s glass harmonica or the sticcade-pastrole. Franklin’s instrument is played with the fingers, and the sticcade-pastrole is played with two small mallets. What is certain is that Mozart had a specific tone color in mind that he could best achieve with this enigmatic instrument.

Why was Papageno given the Glöckchen? One logical and practical possibility may be that Mozart liked the exotic tone of bells. Mozart’s opera orchestrations, moreover, are more colorful than his concert works. In folk cultures such as Papageno’s, bells (on animals or a carriage) also served to avert evil and misfortune. Chailley suggests that Papageno’s “wooden laughter or amusement” instrument and the amusement music it plays was carefully written by Mozart, “placing it in opposition to the magic flute.” He goes on to say that modern “perfected” instruments such as the celesta “take away some of the rusticity desired from an instrument meant to be played upon the stage [in the wings] and certainly not in the pit.”

Chailley states that the Zauberglöckchen, which are “under the sign of the Earth,” are also symbolic:

In Act I it will have an irresistible effect upon Monostatos, who represents the same sign; in Act II, it is during Papageno’s trial by Earth that it will fulfill its purpose of summoning Papagena so that she too may undergo that trial [2.23]. Its use in the finale [2.29] is less easy to explain: perhaps, as so often in the libretto, the explanation lies in parallelism with the preceding scene: just as Tamino and Pamina underwent their trials by Fire and Water together, so Papageno and Papagena too will be united under the double sign of Air and Earth: the flute and the glockenspiel.

The Magic of Music

Perhaps the most sublime moment of the opera occurs when Tamino and Pamina pass through the trials of fire and water (2.28) (example 7). It is here that music’s Orphic power is most evident. All sing after Pamina has explained the origins of the flute to Tamino, “Because of the power of sound we [you] walk happily through death’s dark night.” Pamina then sings, “We walked through the fiery furnace, bravely fought with danger. May your sound be protection in floods of water just as it was in the fire.” At the end of the scene, the triumphal chorus sings, “You have conquered the danger! The dedication of Isis is now yours! Come, enter the Temple.”

Nicholas Till tells us that Die Zauberflöte is “a parable of the magic powers of art, and especially of music, to redeem humankind from its subjection to earthly nature, and ultimately to reunite humanity with the cosmos and restore harmony and bliss.” He nicely summarizes Tamino’s
EXAMPLE 7. Tamino plays *Die Zauberflöte* as he and Pamina begin the trial of Fire (2.28, mm. 362–71).

importance and power “to rouse, and at the same time to tame, wild beasts” with *Die Zauberflöte*, “a symbol not of the subjugation of nature by art, but of mankind’s escape from its subjugation to a baser nature, and its reconciliation with a higher concept of nature through art.” The flute allows him to summon Pamina, and together they enter “the underworld and there [invoke their] art to conquer death itself. . . . Through the mysterious power of the flute Tamino and Pamina are able to penetrate the raging elements and emerge unscathed and purified.”

To summarize:

Tamino’s flute conquers by pacifying the beasts and elements; its power is strange and archaic. Papageno’s bells, on the other hand, conquer by their summons to dance. The slaves who hold Pamina captive are enchanted by Papageno’s bells to dance away to a tune of such pristine, heartlifting innocence that for a moment the burdens of care and anxiety miraculously fall away.

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1. See, for example, Brigid Brophy, *Mozart the Dramatist: A New View of Mozart, His Operas, and His Age*, rev. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World,
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1. The flute was a symbolic instrument in the eighteenth century, often used to represent various qualities and concepts. For example, in the opera Die Zauberflöte, the flute is depicted as a magical instrument that can transform into a lion, symbolizing strength and courage.


3. See, for example, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Die Zauberflöte, Monteverdi Choir, English Baroque Soloists, John Eliot Gardiner, Archiv CD 449-166-2, 1996; and the essay included with this CD by Nicholas McNair, “‘Enter, Pursued by a Lion’: Hermetic Influences in The Magic Flute,” 8–13.


7. Stradner, Klangwelt, 316, pictures (fig. 195) a privately owned Papageno flute made in Austria (ca. 1800) that uses the actual pitches required in the opera: g², a², b², c³, d³. Even today, singers of the role sometimes play panpipes on stage.


9. The flute is “golden,” not of gold but most likely made of boxwood, which has the color of light oak.

10. Chailley, Magic Flute, 123; and Roger J. V. Cotte, Musique et symbolisme: Résonances cosmiques des œuvres et des instruments, (St-Jean-de-Braye: Éditions Dangles, 1988), 61. Operas using magic instruments were quite common in Vienna during the 1780s. The most popular predecessor to Die Zauberflöte is Wenzel
Müller’s Kaspar der Fagottist, quickly renamed Der Fagottist, oder Die Zauberzither [The Bassoonist, or the Magic Zither], first performed June 8, 1791, in the Theater in der Leopoldstadt. Librettist Joachim Perinet adapted J. A. Liebeskind’s story Lulu oder die Zauberflöte, published in 1789. Mozart attended the fourth performance and writes in a letter dated June 12, 1791, to his wife, “To cheer myself up, I went to the Kasperle Theatre to see the new opera ‘Der Fagottist,’ which is making such a sensation, but which is shoddy stuff.” Emily Anderson, The Letters of Mozart and His Family, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1938), 3:1419–20. See also Peter Branscombe, “Kaspar der Fagottist,” in New Grove Dictionary of Opera, 2:956.


15. “Orpheus was first and foremost a musician with shamanic powers. His voice and his lyre had the magical ability to charm animals and to change the course of rivers.” His music would restore harmony and prevent quarreling. Orphics believed that the cosmos began in a primal unity but that harmony was destroyed by the Titans. The rule of Zeus adds unity back into the cosmos. People were admitted into Orphic religion societies by way of an initiation ritual that would produce salvation for the living and the dead and would remove guilt and pardon wrongs. Sexual ecstasy, presumably achieving harmony between man and woman in sacred unity, was part of the Orphic mystery. Larry J. Alderink, “Orphism,” Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:48–50. See also Ovid, Met., 10.1–128, 11.1–99; Virgil, Georgics, 4.452–527; Robert Graves, The Greek Myths, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960), 1:111–12.


18. Chailley, Magic Flute, 125.


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30. Stradner, Klangwelt, 316.

32. Writing in 1844, Hector Berlioz suggests that Mozart’s instrument was a series of small bells played from a keyboard. He also mentions that in Les mystères d’Isis (first performed at the Paris Opéra on August 20, 1801, a musical travesty based on music from Die Zauberflöte and other works by Mozart) a keyboard glockenspiel was used “with hammers striking steel bars instead of bells.” Hugh Macdonald, Berlioz’s Orchestration Treatise: A Translation and Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 276–77. On later performances and parodies of Die Zauberflöte, see Branscombe, Die Zauberflöte, 142–77.


34. In Gardiner’s recording of Die Zauberflöte, a picture of a glockenspiel/carillon made by Robin Jennings is on the verso of the front cover of the “Note to the Recording.”


36. Montagu, Timpani and Percussion, 92–95, discusses four works in which Handel uses his carillon: Saul (1739), Il Trionfo del Tempo (1739), Acis and Galatea (1739), and L’allegro, il Penseroso, ed il Moderato (1740). Montagu also quotes a letter from Handel’s librettist for Saul, Charles Jennens, to Lord Guernsey, dated September 19, 1738, that gives us some idea of the instrument: “Mr Handel’s head is more full of maggots than ever. I found yesterday in his room a very queer instrument which he calls carillon (Anglice, a bell) and says some call it a Tubalcain, I suppose because it is both in the make and tone like a set of hammers striking upon anvils. ‘Tis played upon with keys like a harpsichord and with this Cyclopean instrument he designs to make poor Saul stark mad.” Montagu, Timpani and Percussion, 93, quoted in Winton Dean, Handel’s Dramatic Oratorios and Masques (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 275.


38. Stradner, Klangwelt, 317.
42. Eckelmeyer, *The 1791 Libretto*, 52.