In diesen heil’gen Hallen”?

Debates around Freemasonry in the Music of *The Magic Flute*

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Some of this paper is a little academic, but I will intersperse it with some beautiful music. Let me begin by reading you the synopsis of *The Magic Flute* that the Metropolitan Opera House provides, you have it on your handout too:

A mythical land between the sun and the moon. Three ladies in the service of the Queen of the Night save Prince Tamino from a serpent. When they leave to tell the queen, the birdcatcher Papageno appears. He boasts to Tamino that it was he who killed the creature. The ladies return to give Tamino a portrait of the queen’s daughter, Pamina, who they say has been enslaved by the evil Sarastro. Tamino immediately falls in love with the girl’s picture. The queen, appearing in a burst of thunder, tells Tamino about the loss of her daughter and commands him to rescue her. The ladies give a magic flute to Tamino and silver bells to Papageno to ensure their safety on the journey and appoint three spirits to guide them. Sarastro’s slave Monostatos pursues Pamina but is frightened away by Papageno. The birdcatcher tells Pamina that Tamino loves her and is on his way to save her. Led by the three spirits to the temple of Sarastro, Tamino learns from a high priest that it is the Queen, not Sarastro, who is evil. Hearing that Pamina is safe, Tamino charms the wild animals with his flute, then rushes off to follow the sound of Papageno’s pipes. Monostatos and his men chase Papageno and Pamina but are left helpless when Papageno plays his magic bells. Sarastro enters in great ceremony. He punishes Monostatos and promises Pamina that he will eventually set her free. Pamina catches a glimpse of Tamino, who is led into the temple with Papageno.

Sarastro tells the priests that Tamino will undergo initiation rites. Monostatos tries to kiss the sleeping Pamina but is surprised by the appearance of the Queen of the Night. The Queen gives her daughter a dagger and orders her to murder Sarastro.
Sarastro finds the desperate Pamina and consoles her, explaining that he is not interested in vengeance. Tamino and Papageno are told by a priest that they must remain silent and are not allowed to eat, a vow that Papageno immediately breaks when he takes a glass of water from a flirtatious old lady. When he asks her name, the old lady vanishes. The three spirits appear to guide Tamino through the rest of his journey and to tell Papageno to be quiet. Tamino remains silent even when Pamina appears. Misunderstanding his vow for coldness, she is heartbroken.

The priests inform Tamino that he has only two more trials to complete his initiation. Papageno, who has given up on entering the brotherhood, longs for a wife instead. He eventually settles for the old lady. When he promises to be faithful she turns into a beautiful young Papagena but immediately disappears.

Pamina and Tamino are reunited and face the ordeals of water and fire together, protected by the magic flute.

Papageno tries to hang himself on a tree but is saved by the three spirits, who remind him that if he uses his magic bells he will find true happiness. When he plays the bells, Papagena appears and the two start making family plans. The Queen of the Night, her three ladies, and Monostatos attack the temple but are defeated and banished. Sarastro blesses Pamina and Tamino as all join in hailing the triumph of courage, virtue, and wisdom.

My fascination with the masonic nature of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s 1791 Singspiel *The Magic Flute* was born when, about a decade ago, I read a second-rate murder-mystery (of which I can remember neither the title nor the author—I hope it isn’t any of you). In *Amadeus*, the play turned multi-Oscar-winning movie, it is suggested Mozart’s Requiem was the work that led to the composer’s death; by contrast, the investigator-protagonist of the novel initially postulates that Mozart was poisoned by Viennese freemasons—punishment for his advocacy for the inclusion of women in the fraternity through *The Magic Flute*. However, as the mystery unravels, it becomes clear that the masons did indeed not murder the fictional Mozart, but rather
that they aided the Mozarts in the last years of his life, as well as years thereafter.

That Mozart and his librettist Emmanuel Schikaneder were members of the fraternity is a well-known fact, thoroughly documented by the various lodges to which they were affiliated. Both artists created works that are implicitly or explicitly associated with freemasonry, perhaps most notably the composer’s *Masonic Funeral Music* and a *Little Masonic Cantata* (which is, incidentally, the last work that Mozart completed before his untimely death). Within Mozart scholarship, authors have incorporated his involvement in freemasonry into their biographies and analyses to varying extents, ranging from detailed attempts at divining the complete web of masonic symbols to brief mentions in music history textbooks. The masonic nature of *The Magic Flute* has gone largely unchallenged from the first claims early in the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the twenty-first century, when authors such as David Buch and Jay Macpherson started questioning whether the Singspiel is indeed as masonic as previously claimed and assumed in the literature.

In this paper, I contrast the opposing viewpoints regarding the masonic nature of the music of *The Magic Flute*, emphasizing the points of contestation. Although there has been, as we shall see, a wealth of authors that demonstrate the various elements in the Singspiel that refer to masonic practices and teaching, there has been a call to reevaluate these claims since the turn of the century. This paper is divided into four sections, each dedicated to untangling the discourse around an aspect of the music that has been alleged to have masonic significance: the framing key of the Singspiel; its unusual orchestration; the repeated chords that have been said to allude to ritual knocks in ceremonies of initiation into freemasonry; and finally, numerology. After reflecting on the various authors’ analytical approaches, I conclude by briefly considering
the ontological status of *The Magic Flute* as a (capital M, capital O) “Masonic Opera,” as Jacques Chailley and Celil Hill and Roger Cotte claim it to be—a claim that Buch vehemently disputes.

My aim here is not to provide a general review of the relevant literature, but rather to scrutinize and synthesize the disputes around the topic, in part to share the possibly masonic elements in the Singspiel with you. Perhaps unsurprisingly in a setting of such disagreement, I propose a middle ground, acknowledging that there are indeed strong references to freemasonry in the Singspiel, but also that some claims of such references are often unsubstantiated. Of course, my aims and conclusions are likely shaded by my membership to the fraternity; however, I believe that my partial insider status (taking into account the historical distance between early twenty-first-century English/New York freemasonry and late eighteenth-century Austrian freemasonry) does provide me with insights to which, it seems, many of the authors under discussion were not privy.

1. Key

An aspect of *The Magic Flute* that receives mention in almost every discussion of the masonic elements therein is its framing key: E-flat major, which has three flats—B-flat, E-flat, and A-flat. An overwhelming number of authors maintain that E-flat major is a “masonic key”—indeed Chailley claims “E-flat major, the perfect Masonic tonality”—while others propose a similar label for C minor, E-flat major’s relative minor (it also has three flats). These authors, and others, count the number of flats and ascribe the keys’ significance to the emphasis on the number three in masonic numerology; for example, Chailley states of E-flat: “with the
significance of Number…the hieratic preeminence of E-flat major is born, which brings together the Three of perfection, the major of serenity, and the flats of solemnity.” Those arguing for the masonic nature of these keys often point to Mozart’s other masonic compositions, such as *Die Maurerfreude* and the *Masonic Funeral Music*, which are in E-flat major and C minor, respectively.

However, within *The Magic Flute* itself, there are many numbers that contradict the notion of E-flat major as a specifically masonic key. Although the final, triumphant chorus right at the end is in E-flat, the chorus of the priests—supposed masons—in Act II is in D major, while their march, which opens the same act, is in F major. Similarly, Sarastro—the supposed master mason—has two arias, neither of which is in E-flat (although Chailley maintains that the key is *his*). Let’s take a listen to the final chorus to hear the majesty of E-flat major (play Ex 1).

There are also instances where the inverse is the case. After the three ladies slay the serpent near the opening of Act I, they—as agents that oppose Master Sarastro and his brethren—sing of their triumph in so-called masonic key of E-flat major. Other numbers are also in E-flat major, yet deal with love, erotic rather than fraternal, such as Tamino’s aria “Such Loveliness Beyond Compare” when he sees the portrait of the princess (Play Ex 2).

While there is nothing explicitly or specifically masonic about E-flat major, in the years around the composition of *The Magic Flute*, the key was understood to have other attributes, many of which can be applied to masonry with ease: “The key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation with God; through its three flats it expresses the holy trinity”; “Religious”; “Splendid and Solemn”; “Solemnity of priesthood. Noble, solemn, dignified, magnificent. Represents men excellently because of their elevated standing;” and “Heroic, extremely majestic,
grave, and serious.” So, E-flat major, then, does not point to freemasonry specifically, but endows the music with characteristics that the composer associates with masonic practices, including religiosity and solemnity.

2. Orchestration

Certain aspects of the choice of key might be explained by considering the characteristics, associations, and limitations of various instruments and/or singers. With regards to the vocal parts, Erik Smith points out that another reason for selecting one key over another is that it suits the specific singer for whom Mozart was writing the part, which is a practice that the composer often followed (for example, Tamino’s leap up to at the opening of “Such Loveliness” necessitates the aria to be in E-flat).

One last aspect that might have led Mozart to writing the scenes that have alleged masonic significance in E-flat is the fact that a key suits the wind instruments of the orchestra well. Thomson notes that wind instruments, notably clarinets, basset horns, bassoons, and horns, were often used to provide music during Viennese masonic rituals—these instruments are also prominently featured in Mozart’s other masonic works—and that their inclusion and prominence in the Singspiel allude to the timbres heard during such ceremonies. In addition to the then-standard wind instruments, the score of *The Magic Flute* notably also includes three trombones that, all the authors in question agree, add an air of solemnity from outset with the opening chords of the overture, which we’ll hear in a minute. However, Buch notes that the wind timbres that Mozart uses here are not uncommon in eighteenth-century music, particularly opera.

3. Those Three Chords
At the moment when the priests reach consensus about whether Tamino is to be initiated into their order (3), three sets of three chords are sounded in the winds, which notably includes three trombones, referring to, as had been argued time and time again, the three knocks on the door of the lodge when a candidate, prepared in an adjacent chamber, is prepared for the ceremony of initiation. The three-times-three chords in the winds also appear, verbatim in the overture; five chords at the beginning, and then later nine. However, there are two points of divergence between Mozart’s knocks and those of the candidate requesting to be admitted into the lodge: the three-fold repetition; and the rhythm. While the candidate is usually expected to knock only once (one-times-three), within the lodge, three senior officers exchange three-knock patterns at various points of the ritual, leading to the three-times-three pattern of the chords in the overture and march.

As for the rhythmic figure, each of the three degrees in masonry, at least in English masonry, into which I was initiated, passed, and raised, has its own knocking pattern. The pattern always consists of three knocks, yet in different rhythms. The first degree knock, which would have been the most closest parallel to the scenario presented in the Singspiel, is three equal strokes (\textit{clap} long-long-long). Interestingly, Mozart never presents this rhythm with the appropriate trombone/woodwind timbre in \textit{The Magic Flute}.

The second-degree knocking pattern is \textit{clap} long-short-long and appears shortly before Tamino and Pamina endure the initiatory trials by fire and water, in the same trombone-heavy orchestration. The knocking-woodwind choir pairing repeats only once. However, the orchestration does not conform to the previous iterations of the chords, and neither does the harmonic makeup. Additionally, the two-fold repetition is at odds with the three-fold repetition
of the overture and priests’ deliberation, although that might be explained away by claiming that Mozart uses two knocks for the second degree and three for the third. We’ve heard the third-degree pattern; this is the second: \((\text{play Ex. 5})\) The rhythm in which the initiatory chords are presented, as we have heard an example ago, is that of the third-degree knock: \(\text{clap short-long-long}\). I should note that the three-times-three knocks in the rhythm that Mozart presents, might be familiar at least to some of the members of the Grande Orient.

Chailley spends a good deal of time on the discrepancy between the five chords at the beginning of the overture and the three-times-three chords that appear later. Chailley claims that five represents the female lodges of freemasonry (and thereby women in general), while three is the representation of male masonry (and thereby men in general).

While the knocks themselves certainly seem to allude to the masonic ritual of initiation, Buch maintains that there is nothing particularly masonic about starting an overture to an opera with three chords (or five, which is actually the case). The short-long rhythmic pattern dates back to the French overture commonly used by Jean Baptiste Lully in the previous century. However, as Malcolm Davies points out, Buch completely ignores the three-times-three iterations, which has no other interpretation than a quotation of a lodge ‘batterie’.

4. Mystic numbers, gematria, and other numerologies

All the authors cited note the significance of the number three (particularly with regards to E-flat major, but also notable in the grouping of characters, such as the three spirits and three ladies, and the three temples etc.). Several authors expand their numerological study to include other numbers, often claiming that the play of numbers forms a complex web of secret meaning
in *The Magic Flute*, leading Buch to claim that this search for symbolism “has dominated scholarly discussions of Mozart’s singspiel.”

I have already noted Chailley’s emphasis on opposition between the numbers three and five (representing men and women, respectively). He also weaves in the number four, to which he connects the elemental trials which the protagonists have to overcome. However, a reviewer points out that Chailley’s “mathematics are not always accurate: particularly where the mystical numbers are concerned—and that he hears what he wants to hear.”

The number three has clear symbolic meaning in freemasonry, particularly in what is known as the St. John ceremony—the first three degrees. Yet, there are side orders to the St. John ceremony, including the so-called Scottish Rite, which takes masons up to the thirty-third degree. Robbins Landon claims that the numbers of the critical degrees in the Scottish Rite are scenes of particular import in *The Magic Flute*. In the eighteenth scene of Act I, Sarastro appears with eighteen priests, reflecting the Rosicrucian eighteenth degree. Furthermore, Landon draws a parallel between the “degree of revenge,” number thirty in the Scottish Rite, and the thirtieth scene in Act II, in which the Queen of the Night and her followers attempt to attack the temple; and the final scene, the thirty-third, in which Sarastro and his followers stand victorious, mirrors the final degree, which has the motto “chaos out of order” or “darkness into light.” While the specificity of the eighteen priests in the eighteenth scene makes Landon’s argument more plausible, the fact that there is no thirty-third scene in Act II (the final scene is the thirtieth) casts doubt over the argument’s accuracy and validity.

Landon and Chailley both use numerology in a limited sense, employing it when it illuminates a particular point; by contrast, Hans-Josef Irmen and I. Grattan-Guinness both
propose extensive numerological accounts of the Singspiel as a whole. The last part of Irmen’s book is dedicated to divinations of various portions of *The Magic Flute* through Cabalistic gematria, in which each letter is assigned a number (corresponding to its position in the alphabet) and words or phrases can then be formed from these numbers, which allude to other words with the same totals. While Irmen’s manipulation of the numbers is quite impressive, gematria is never an exact method of analysis; the numbers and letters can be twisted to form almost any combination of words, drawn from any set of notes. Additionally, the numbers are also subject to permutation and inversion, as well as zeros being added wherever Irmen needs to tailor his findings.

Although Irmen’s methodology has its shortcomings, it is far tighter than that of Grattan-Guinness. The latter author is prepared to count anything from page or measure numbers, to notes in a melody, to the well-rehearsed number of flats in the key; he does not, however, believe that Mozart used gematria as such. Similar to his wealth of possible sources of numbers, he also ascribes significance to a very wide range of numbers, including 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 12, their factors, squares, pyramidals, and combinations. While it seems that the range of numbers would make it impossible not to find anything of significance within a given passage, Grattan-Guinness is still required to alter the rules as he goes along, omitting various aspects of the score in his counting. Only in a few passages does he go beyond pointing out the numbers, which might be acceptable when the results follow his initial designations of the numbers (3 = male, etc.), but not when they are subverted—for example, he finds many 3s in the arias of the Queen of the Night, which certainly requires some explanation. Additionally, some of the results quote “resist the numerological principles.” The last aspect that casts serious doubt on Grattan-
Guinness’s work is that it is rife with errors, ranging from the incorrect description of the
different degrees’ knocking rhythms to an egregious claim that Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto has
four movements—it indisputably has three.

Numerology, in its simplest form (i.e. that certain numbers have significance in certain
contexts), undoubtedly impacts the music and text in *The Magic Flute*, however, the fact that
three of the above-mentioned authors feel compelled to include a passage that reflects on the
viability of numerology in their writing indicates that its importance in understanding the
Singspiel might not be as critical as they make it out to be.

**Conclusion**

In discussing the various points of contention in the scholarship around the masonic
nature of *The Magic Flute*, two things become clear. The first is that, perhaps unsurprisingly,
极端 accounts and grand theories do not withstand scrutiny. What emerges then is a middle-
of-the-road view that Mozart incorporated masonic references into the work for artistic ends
rather than for an underlying network of signification. This view stems from the disavowal of the
larger claims of hidden meaning by Chailley, Irmen, Grattan-Guinness, and, to a lesser extent,
Landon; but an acknowledgement of the surface-level allusions to freemasonry.

Few authors note the reception history of *The Magic Flute*, usually in arguing some point
about how Mozart’s audience would have understood it, or, in the case of Buch, when the
Singspiel became known as a “Masonic Opera.” Davies, however, presents a different mode of in
which he demonstrates various ways in which *The Magic Flute* has been incorporated into
specifically masonic musical practices since its premiere. He shows that some of Mozart’s
melodies, particularly Sarastro’s aria “In diesen heil’gen Hallen,” made their way into songbooks
used by freemasons in The Netherlands. In addition, he provides an example of how a later composer, W. F. G. Nicolaï, was influenced by Mozart’s music of masonic nature. Like Mozart, Nicolaï also composed funerary music for the passing of fellow mason in the same C minor as the *Masonic Funeral Music*. The opening of Nicolaï’s work, however, bears remarkable similarity with to the overture of *The Magic Flute*, using elements of both the five-knock pattern and the three-times-three knocks, this work is unfortunately not well-known or often recorded, so you have to endure my piano version of the opening (play Ex 6).

Chailley argues that *The Magic Flute* is a Masonic Opera, claiming that Mozart purposefully constructed the Singspiel around masonic allusion; Buch’s focus in his refutation of the concept of a “Masonic Opera” is also on authorial intent. However, following Davies’s example, it might become clear that some, perhaps those that know the history of the Singspiel or perhaps those that have been initiated into the fraternity, will experience *The Magic Flute* as ontologically Masonic.