

“Der Hölle Rache” (Queen of the Night’s Aria), from *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s involvement with opera spanned nearly all of his short career. From *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, a Latin intermezzo that was produced at Salzburg University in 1767, when he was 11, to *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), which reached the stage at the end of September 1791, little more than two months before his death, Mozart completed 19 operas. During his final year, he composed two, *La clemenza di Tito* and *Die Zauberflöte*, both of which lay claim to being his last stage work. He finished almost all of *Die Zauberflöte* during the spring and early summer of 1791, but several numbers (including the Overture) remained to be written when, in July, Mozart was invited to compose an opera, to Metastasio’s already much-used libretto *La clemenza di Tito*, for the festivities surrounding the coronation in Prague of Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia. He gladly accepted, plunging into a flurry of composition that continued until the eve of the performance, which took place on September 6. *La clemenza di Tito* enjoyed only a moderate reception at first, due in large part to some deficiencies in the casting, but audiences gradually warmed to it, and its final performance, on September 30, was acknowledged as a resounding success.

Mozart, however, had to enjoy this cliffhanger of a triumph from a distance, since he had returned to Vienna two weeks earlier to oversee final preparations for the premiere of *Die Zauberflöte*. He had recently renewed a friendship with Emanuel Schikaneder, a singer-actor-dancer-manager-playwright who had been bumping up against the Mozart family with some regularity since late 1780, when a company he directed appeared

in Salzburg. He was now at the helm of Vienna’s 1,000-seat Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden, where he specialized in presenting lighthearted German-language *Singspiels*, sometimes to librettos he had written himself. His resident musical ensemble was substantial, including an orchestra of 35 players and an impressive troupe of singing actors.

Schikaneder himself crafted the libretto, drawing on several collections of stories and fairy tales popular in Germany and Austria at the time. His audience did not embrace the new work immediately, but — mirroring Mozart’s recent experience with *La clemenza di Tito* — they soon fell under its charms. Mozart conducted only the first two performances and then relinquished the podium to colleagues who husbanded the *Singspiel* to huge popular acclaim. Finally, Mozart had a

IN SHORT

Born: January 27, 1756, in Salzburg, Austria

Died: December 5, 1791, in Vienna

Work composed: *Die Zauberflöte*, mostly between April and July 1791, to a libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder

World premiere: September 30, 1791, at Vienna’s Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden; Josepha Hofer (Mozart’s sister-in-law) sang the part of the Queen of the Night.

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 11, 1890, Theodore Thomas, conductor, Clementine de Vere, soprano

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 21, 1952, Alexander Smallens, conductor, Roberta Peters, soprano

Estimated duration: ca. 3 minutes

much-needed hit on his hands. If he had not died little more than two months following the premiere, *Die Zauberflöte* would doubtless have changed the course of his life.

At heart, *Die Zauberflöte* is the story of Tamino and Pamina, who fall in love and must prove their worthiness through a series of trials before they can embark on their life together. The plot, it is said, is an allegory for Masonic beliefs and rites. For listeners not party to that secret information, the narrative takes an unusual twist. The Queen of the Night sends Tamino on a mission to rescue Pamina (her daughter) from the clutches of Sarastro, who has abducted her. But it turns out that Sarastro is the good guy and that Pamina was deceived in assuming that her mother acted in her best interests. In Act Two, the

Queen of the Night gives Pamina a dagger, commands her to kill Sarastro and retrieve the “seven-fold circle of the sun,” a power-infused totem that Pamina’s father had given to Sarastro. Pamina tries to protest, but the Queen cuts her off. “Hell’s vengeance boils in my heart,” she proclaims in her dazzling aria “Der Hölle Rache.” “Death and despair blaze around me!” In a bristling display of coloratura filled with agitated rhythms, wide melodic leaps, and arpeggios that lead repeatedly to stratospheric F’s, the Queen proclaims her thirst for vengeance and threatens to disown Pamina if she fails to carry out her grim task.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo soprano.

Text and Translation

“Der Hölle Rache” (“Hell’s vengeance”), from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*)

Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder

*Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen,
Tod und Verzweiflung flammet um
mich her!*

*Fühlt nicht durch dich Sarastro
Todesschmerzen,*

So bist du meine Tochter nimmermehr.

*Verstoßen sei auf ewig,
verlassen sei auf ewig,
zertrümmert sei’n auf ewig
alle Bande der Natur.*

*Wenn nicht durch dich Sarastro wird
erblassen!*

*Hört, Rachegötter, hört, der
Mutter Schwur!*

Hell’s vengeance boils in my heart;
Death and despair blaze around me!
For if Sarastro feels not the pain of death
through thee,
Thence shall thou be my daughter
nevermore.

Disowned be thee forever,
Abandoned be thee forever,
Shattered be forever
All the bonds of nature

If it is not through thee that Sarastro
turns pale!
Hear ye, gods, of vengeance, hear the
mother’s oath!