Overture to The Magic Flute, K. 620--Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart’s incomparable musical gifts enabled him to compose at the highest level of artistic brilliance in almost every musical genre. We are privileged to experience his legacy in symphonies, chamber music, wind serenades, choral music, keyboard music—the list goes on and on, but unquestionably, his greatest contributions to musical art are his operas. No one—not even Wagner, Verdi, Puccini, or Richard Strauss excelled the perfection of Mozart’s mature operas. The reason, of course, is clear: his unparalleled musical gift is served and informed by a nuanced insight into human psychology that is simply stunning. While Mozart composed both comic operas and serious operas, and in both German and Italian, his major body of work lies in his opera buffe, or Italian comic operas. Almost every music lover cherishes his Cosi fan tutte, The Marriage of Figaro, and Don Giovanni, but his last opera—Die Zauberflöte, meaning The Magic Flute—is rather different from these.

Die Zauberflöte was given its première in 1791 in Vienna, the last year of Mozart’s life. It is in German with spoken lines written by his collaborator, Emanuel Schikaneder. It garnered immediate popularity, never diminishing to this day, for any number of ingratiating elements. A varied cast of singers and characters entertain us from the rise of the curtain: a comic, feathery pair of bird/human lovers, an earnest pair of real human lovers, an evil Moor (standard in Viennese drama of the times—the Turks were a very real threat to Europe), a noble high priest and his chorus of priestly followers, an evil queen and her retinue, a pair of ghostly men in armor, trios of boys and virtuous wraith-like women, and to top it all off, enchanted animals. On the stage! Did I mention “magic” flutes and bells? You get the picture—something to please almost anyone.

However, it is not all fun and games—this allegory, like perhaps Shakespeare’s Midsummer Night’s Dream, is a profound exploration of some of life’s deepest and most essential issues. Courage, transfiguration, wisdom, romantic love, illusion and perception, freedom, and unity—all are examined in depth. It has been said that one definition of a masterpiece is that it is rather like an artichoke: one peels tasty layer after layer only to find the best part hidden at the center, and thus it is with this work.

Many significant men of the Enlightenment were Masons, and so were Mozart and Schikaneder. Generations of Masons and scholars have found that The Magic Flute is permeated from beginning to end with Masonic values and symbolism, and we hear it right from the opening chords of the overture: three chords, dominated by three trombones, and in the key of E♭ (three flats). This emphasis upon the symbolic three continues throughout the opera, with a plethora of other symbolic allusions. After the somber opening, the strings zip off in a vivacious fugato (you can hear each section come in one after the other) that takes us to a dramatic ending that sets a perfect introduction to a perfect opera—one that speaks to the common nature of us all.

Violin Concerto No. 5 in A Major, K. 219 “Turkish”--Mozart

Visitors to the small, sparse museum located in the putative home of the Mozart’s in Salzburg will see a glass display case containing the little violin of the young Wolfgang. It reminds us of the centrality of the violin in Mozart’s younger days. His father, Leopold, was the author of the most celebrated tutor for the violin in the eighteenth century, published 1756
Little Wolfgang was his prize pupil, and his performances on the violin were a mainstay of his celebrity during all those barnstorming tours as a child. A little older and back home in Salzburg, Mozart led the little court orchestra as a virtuoso concertmaster. In 1775, at the age of nineteen, Mozart composed all five of his violin concertos, for own use, of course. Though composed rather quickly in succession, each concerto shows growing mastery of the genre, culminating in the important A Major concerto. In many respects it is his swansong for the violin, for after leaving Salzburg for Vienna a few years later, he never again played the violin in any significant situations, preferring to play the piano in public and the viola in private music making with his friends.

The A Major concerto is perhaps the best violin concerto of the latter half of the eighteen century, and probably the most frequently played violin concerto. It certainly merits the attention because this work marks Mozart’s emerging mature style in every way. In the first movement, Mozart’s imagination comes to the fore immediately, for upon the entrance of the soloist, the whole atmosphere of the movement changes for a bit, as the bustling tempo of the orchestra is replaced by a brief slow passage of considerable gravitas for the soloist. The faster tempo resumes, but in the middle of the movement we encounter darkly colored excursions in minor keys and somber emotion. This is rather typical of music from this period in Mozart’s life, and some listeners may remember similar passages in his so-called “Little G Minor” symphony from the same period. The middle movement is predictably a lyrical one, simply of exquisite beauty.

It is the last movement that gives the concerto its moniker, and starts out as a conventional dance (it is a minuet) in a form in which the main idea alternates with other contrasting ideas. It is in the contrasting section that occurs just before the last statement of our familiar main theme that Mozart “drops the bomb.” For this surprise, he recycles a kind of “Turkish” march from an earlier opera, “The Jealous Harem Women.” It is different in every way: tempo, meter, mood, culture—you name it. So-called “Turkish” music was all the rage in Vienna then owing to the threat to the city by the Turks for centuries (Museums in the city, today, are full of artifacts from the wars). All of the major composers wrote pieces with what the Viennese thought of as Turkish qualities: cymbals, drums, triangles, piccolo, thumping bass lines, etc. You will remember Beethoven’s use of the conceit in the last movement of his Ninth Symphony. Well, it comes as a complete surprise here, rather like an uninvited drunken guest at the party, and it is all great fun. The basses enhance the effect of tomfoolery by striking the strings with the wooden part of their bows. Just when things seem out of control, the graceful minuet returns and all is put right. Surprisingly, the movement ends quietly, almost with a sigh, not apologetically, but definitely rather like conciliatory relief.

**Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 73—Johannes Brahms**

Simply put, the composers of the nineteenth century after Beethoven tended to divide themselves into two groups. The progressives were true “Romantics,” and were greatly influenced by the extra-musical ideas that were the subjects of contemporary literature, poetry, and painting, among others. They devised new genres, such as the tone poems of Smetana and Liszt, the music dramas of Wagner, and the characteristic piano pieces of Chopin. This music, to use a phrase still common among seekers of meaning in music, was about “something”—meaning something familiar to human existence. Others, Brahms most significantly, still adhered strongly to the musical philosophy that great music was simply about “itself,” and required no
extra-musical references for complete and satisfying meaning. Therefore, he and his ilk continued to write “pure” or “abstract” music, like sonatas and symphonies (a so-called symphony is just a sonata for orchestra). The example of Beethoven’s music (in this tradition) loomed almost as overwhelming for Brahms, and he waited for decades after reaching musical maturity to essay his first symphony, completing it in 1876, when he was forty-three years old. It garnered sufficient success to be deemed the “Tenth,” referencing Beethoven’s nine in that genre, although it bears more comparison with Beethoven’s fifth symphony.

It did not take Brahms nearly so long to write his second symphony as it did the first, and the mood of the work is a strong contrast to that of the mighty seriousness of the first. That is not to say that the second is not without a gravitas that is an essential part of the composer’s musical (and his own, for that matter) personality. However, if anything, one could characterize this important work as “sunny.” It is common to call it his “pastoral” symphony. That being said, it is still Brahms, and therefore infused with melancholy—not tragedy, not sadness, just deep reflection upon the human condition. It was composed during the summer of 1877, while Brahms was vacationing in a particularly beautiful part of southern Austria, surrounded by inspiring mountains and tranquil lakes. He certainly understood the work’s general cheerfulness, but playfully teased his publisher about the nature of the symmetry by claiming that it was such a dark and gloomy work that the score should be edged in black. We know better, of course.

The first movement opens with a simple little four-note motive in the low strings that absolutely forms the core of the piece. Only a consummate artisan like Brahms could do so much with such a simple idea. The motive pervades the movement, and it is a cheerful and rewarding process to spot as many variants of it as the music unfolds. As soon as we hear that motive, romantic horns—evoking the bucolic setting—play another essential motive. We will hear a lot of each. The warmth and optimism of the opening has no sooner started, than unexpectedly there is a soft, menacing timpani roll and quiet, sinister passage in the trombones. Brahms explained, though he had intended to do without the trombones in the first movement, he could not resist depicting the “black wings” constantly flapping above us all. Soon thereafter, the alert listener will spot Brahms’ famous “Cradle Song” melody appearing as a major melodic element in the movement. The middle of the movement is a vigorous working out of all that we have heard, including some startling real nastiness in the trombones, that remind us that all is not happiness and light. A varied review of the entire familiar wraps up the movement, and we end calmly and securely in a soft chord of affirmation.

The second movement is one of Brahms’ loveliest creations, beginning with the cello section spinning out a long-breathed, elegant line. The lyricism continues with other equally attractive tunes, and after a short development, the movement ends as tranquilly and softly, as does the first.

The third movement is a graceful evocation of a lighthearted walk and scamper through the out of doors, to my mind. Two contrasting sections alternate: the first a gentle stroll—but almost slowly waltzing, and the second a rough, rather Beethoven-like scurry. Yet, for all the motion, this movement, too, like the first two, ends quietly.

After all of this placidity, the time has come to “let’er rip,” and the last movement opens in the strings with the quiet intensity of summer lighting on the horizon. We just know that this is going to be a romp, and it is. A few simple, memorable themes carry this thing along, and while it is tempting to track them as Brahms works them around and about—it is not really about that process at all. It is about his uncanny ability to build and release tension, to kick you about with unexpected accents, to cross and re-cross the meters as he builds a tight and remarkable
architecture that drives in a fury to the end. The so-called second theme becomes the primary element that relentlessly carries us to the final magnificent statement in the trumpets, and a blaze of a D major chord in the now optimistic trombones concludes all. There are few moments in all of music so glorious.

--Wm. E. Runyan

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