

With the "Magic Flute" in Pandemic

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Abstract: *The paper invite to a reflection on one of the most current themes, namely, opera performance in the pandemic. One of Tompa Gábor's recent directorial performances of W. A. Mozart 's Magic Flute saw the limelight in October 2020 on the stage of the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca. Interpreted in a contemporary key, the stage representation proposes a new vision on the future of a young couple in love in a chaotic, deceptive, labyrinthine world, dominated by profit, manipulation and temptations, in which the truth is relative and the value replaced by its simulacrum. A universe of meanings adapted to the immediate reality in which, more than ever, we intuit, we even feel the strings with which the puppeteers of this world force us to play according to their own interest.*

Key words: *W. A. Mozart, pandemic, Hungarian Opera from Cluj- Napoca, Tompa Gábor; contemporary staging vision.*

The scenic, musical, directorial reinterpretation of any work of art is an open act of perception and representation, multiplied *ad infinitum* by the number of shows of human personalities involved in them over time. More than any work ever composed, *The Magic Flute* by W.A. Mozart in his last year of life, fascinated and fertilized the imagination of thousands of artists and researchers engaged in a vast process of "interpretation" of symbols and allegories, of the hidden messages and of the "paradigms" behind the music and the characters. An *opera aperta*, in the sense that Umberto Eco defines in culture and in which the "truth" is intended to be revealed and, at the same time, "closed" in a re-reading and a representation that cannot avoid the personalized vision of the director and the artists involved.

The comprising of all scientific perspectives on the interpretations of the layers of meanings of the work can be utopian, involving an enormous research work. However, two directions can be seen in terms of interpretation options:



- the first could be related to all the elements that include the hidden meanings of the work in a social-historical vision confined to the Enlightenment;
- the second, in a timeless vision, which can be assimilated even to contemporaneity.

If the vision of a historically informed interpretation can often be considered politically correct including all aspects related to the dramatic social “changes” of mentality and thinking, at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the vision of a contemporary interpretation is in perfect concordance with reading and rereading the “signs of our time”, through the prism of a truly universal work.

In the first category we can include the passionate research of historians who offer various interpretive visions of the work viewed as it follows:

- Political pamphlet - the characters being from the French or Austrian imperial court: - Marie Therese - Queen of the Night; Ignaz von Born (Head of the Masonic Lodge in Vienna) - Sarastro; Tamino - Prince Joseph II and Pamina, the Austrian people. In the French version, the Queen of the Night was Marie Antoinette; (Penciu, 2015, 69-70 apud Breakspear 1902, 180);
- A Masonic work containing rituals, signs, specific symbols such as the ritual of initiation through the test of silence, water, fire¹ (Eckelmeyer, 2005);
- A fairytale opera inspired both by the German sing-spiel genre with fantastic subjects and by collections of fairy tales in circulation in Mozart's time²; (Eckelmeyer, 2005);
- Research has also highlighted the reinterpretation of the Orphic myth in this work as well, the character of initiatic opera, inspired by the Egyptian mysteries. The opera induces the idea the transformation of the initiate through the deep understanding of life as a result of a spiritual connection with the cultural memory of the ancient mysteries (Assmann, 2005 apud. Eckelmeyer 2005);
- Another interpretive perspective is the psychoanalytic one. The work is seen as a whole in which each character is a representation of the *psyche*, an allegory of the evolution of the soul represented as anima (Pamina) and animus (Tamino) by purification to perfection.(Eckelmeyer 2005 apud Koenigsberger 1975, 229-275);
- From the same perspective, Erich Neumann (student of C.G. Jung) interprets the work from an archetypal point of view using the categories day-night, masculine-feminine, bringing arguments in favor of the work conceived as a dream with multiple levels represented by conscious, subconscious and unconscious (Eckelmeyer 2005 apud Neumann 1953, 5-32);

¹ Having as source the essay *The Mysteries of the Egyptians (Isis and Osiris)*, by Ignaz von Born, published in *Journal für Freymaurer*, 1783, or the fictional work *Sethos*, by Abbé Jean Terrason, 1732. Ignaz von Born, the leader of the Viennese Masonic lodge is identified with Sarastro.

² As the ones edited by Christoph Martin Wieland in 1736.



- Closely related to the idea of Masonic opera, the interpretation from the alchemical perspective brings together symbols and allegories of the characters seen as precious substances and metals whose combination results in the Great Opera, the philosopher's stone meant to confer immortality³(Eckelmeyer 2005 apud van den Berk 2004, 229)
- Numerological interpretation of the work reveals the importance of figures such as 1, 3, 7, 18, the importance of the golden section in the structure and construction of the work, of the plot and of the music (Eckelmeyer 2005 apud Grattan-Guinness 1992, 201-232)

Compared to these researches, which may seem either rigid-scientific or speculative, the director can place himself either on the side of the “historical truth” or on the side of the transhistorical one.

The second perspective allowed the director Tompa Gábor to offer the audience of the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca a variant based on the immediate reality. The director, thus, introduces us to the story of young lovers who set off in a world without values, chaotic, labyrinthine, dominated by social anomie, the cult of money and power, a world in a culture war and, now, in the present pandemic, in a medical war (Kiss 04.10 2020). A period theorized and called Post-truth because truth has become so relative that it no longer exists or is replaced by its simulacrum. It is a social phenomenon in which it does not matter what is real or objective, but only what produces emotion finds its logic in its own recipes on reality (Marin 2017). An era in which fake news become weapons in the hands of radical groups such as *Cancel Culture*, *Cancelling*, *Blacklisting*, *Black Lives Matter*, *Blue Lives Matter*, *White lives Mater* whose blacklists include the names of people, entities, historical figures, works of art that must disappear in the name of a political correctness. Intolerance, radicalization, skepticism, moral relativism, distrust of the authorities and the political factor, are evils which grind the contemporary society over which dominates with authority a last answer to the turmoil of humanity: the Pandemic of Covid 19.

What is the alternative? What is salvation? What is the right path, the Way, the future of young people who set out on their lives in such times?...

³ Other important researchers of this theme are Alfred Whittaker, *Mineralogy and Magic Flute*, a lecture to the Austrian Mineralogical Society in October 1998 and Andrew Lux.



The *Ars Poetica* of the performance

There are current questions that Mozart invites us to meditate on through this work, is the opinion of the director Tompa Gábor. A testamentary opera and a faustian opera in his vision (since the main character is misled by the dark side of evil and temporarily joins it). Mozart found answers in the ways of some progressives of the society of his time: "Sarastro's Masons" state the director in an interview, "promoted true human values while the current Masonic lodges seem more like mafia organizations" (Kiss 29.09 2020).

The answer can be found in faith, but contemporary religion is that of money, the financial interest of corrupt banking power, the greed of corporations and the pharmaceutical industries that manipulate and control humanity through the media, social media, the Internet. The solution to get out of this labyrinthine world, with thousands of deceptive faces, is the hope that comes from "sincere human relationships", from the healing power of love and music that illuminates the path to "purity", perfection, truth, by rehabilitating moral values in a drifting world. Today's young people who embrace a Christian value such as marriage and do not allow themselves to be manipulated by the frightening strings of the puppeteers of this world, think responsibly about the future of humanity, says the director (Kiss 29.09 2020). This is the hope of the future, the red thread with which Tompa Gábor joins the line of a militancy of moral values, of faith, situating itself in a blatant counter-offensive, towards the moral and spiritual relativism of the post-postmodern era. "I try to show the musical image of beauty, of goodness in 2020, in a period of epidemic", says György Selmeczi, the opera director (quoted by Kiss Judith, 04.10 2020). The Hungarian language in which the libretto is interpreted gives us indications that, like Mozart in his time, the capitalization of the national language and identity is also a perennial, indestructible value.

Dramatic structure and the *Stimmung* (The Spirit of the time)

The dramatic structure was not fragmented, following the natural thread of the unfolding of each scene according to the original libretto. (Popa 2020)

The film montage made on the overture introduces us to the "Spirit of the times". Three chords accompanied by symbolic images: The All-Seeing Eye - the Earth - the WHO logo on the introduction of Adagio, streets, deserted subway stations and empty buildings appear. Theme 1 of the overture rolls images of Covid 19 research labs, growing infection statistics, churches, coffin-filled cemeteries, reddened world map, Trump playing golf, Putin and Erdogan eating ice cream, while radical groups decapitate statues, set them at fire, in a frenzy of eradication of Cancel Culture eradication done in the name of a Reparation revenge. Military and paramilitary troops fight demonstrators and on another front, in crowded hospitals, doctors fight for every life.

Other "visible" symbolic elements in the surface layer that are treated by the director in a contemporary key are the following:



- The monster that follows Pamino is the virus itself, and Pamino is rescued by the Three Ladies dressed in anti-Covid protective medical suits, who vaccinate him and lock him up in an isolette.
- Papageno lives in a cage that symbolizes the containment and self-isolation of today's simple man dominated instinctually by fear.



Figure 1

- The three Ladies, accessorized with leather clothes and sunglasses seem to be state security agents (agent 007 or FBI, CIA, SRI, SIE), they silence Papageno by putting a mask on him as punishment for lying.
- The Queen of the Night dressed as a businesswoman, assimilated to the corporate spirit, giving a motivational speech from the desk, induces the idea of "evil" acting through manipulation, lying (fake news) and emotion, holding in her hands the financial and political power.

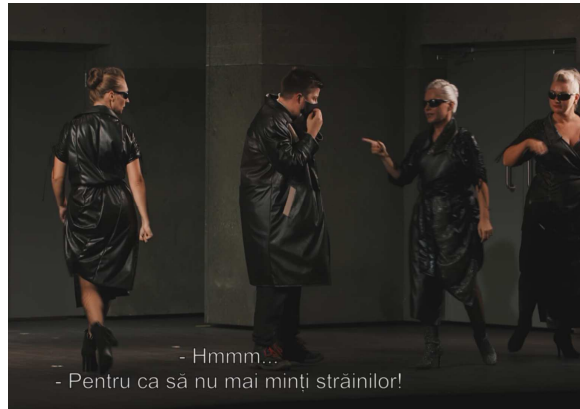


Figure 2

- The Queen of the Night dressed as a businesswoman, assimilated to the corporate spirit, giving a motivational speech from the desk, induces the idea of "evil" acting through manipulation, lying (fake news) and emotion, holding in her hands the financial and political power.



Figure 3

- The three children appear on electric tricycles, and represent the ideals of a new world united and defended. They hand Tamino flags with the symbols of the European Union, NATO, WHO and at least surprising slogans *Black Life matters*, *Its in my DNA*, telling him: "The road leads to the goal; if you are brave, strong and silent, you will win". They represent the future and the hope of salvation by



showing Tamino the Way of the moral virtues with which he can overcome the deceptive reality of the contemporary world.



Figure 4

- Moor Monostatos is the leader of some commando troops symbolizing the gross military power, the coercive power of the state, which changes its attitude and becomes servile according to interests. Their aggressiveness can be tamed by the magical sounds of the flute that represent the ideal of beauty and harmony.



Figure 5



- Sarastro is the enlightened leader, but also a priest, priest of light, of good, "the hero of faith and the scourge of sins". He consecrates the path of love for the two young people who have gone through the trials of silence, fire and water, and whose purpose is marriage in the house of God. Sin is thus cleansed, and Light drives away the promiscuity of Darkness.



Figure 6



Figure 7

The concept of costumes and scenography was framed in a minimalist construct aiming timelessness: huge cubes with multiple functionality, and a symbolic light design: black - the palace of the Queen of the Night; blue - the temple of the gods Isis and Osiris finally transformed into a cathedral with a stained glass huge cross. The color codes of the vestments change according to the dramatic evolution: at Tamino, the black turns into priestly and in groom's white after successfully completing the stages of initiation, just like the priests of the temple as well as Sarastro who also wears the papal purple. Black turns red once Papageno finds its mate, Papagena; the white of the medical costumes of the Three Ladies (Fairies) turns to black which symbolizes the dark side, and the provocative evening dresses the immoral use of the power of seduction. And the examples could go on.

Finally, I use Penciu (2015) method and frame in Greimas's actantial diagram a possible allegorical interpretation of Tompa Gábor's show as I personally received it.

Actant	Character	Interpretation
Consignee	The earth The New Paradise	The future of mankind will be sanctified by a re-evaluation of truth, goodness and moral values. Light overcomes Darkness, Faith overcomes sin.
Subject	Tamino	Today's young man in search of the Way, the Road to Love, Goodness and Truth
Object	Pamina	Today's young woman in search of the Way, the Road to Love, Goodness and Truth
Sender	Sarastro	The new spiritual Leader who will initiate and lead them on the



		path of forgiveness and faith in moral virtues (Pope Francis) "the hero of faith, the scourge of sins"
Opponent	Queen of the Night	The representative of the Post-Truth society, of the materialist ideals (corporations, banks, political institutions) of the manipulating power. It is at war with moral and spiritual values = Christian (atheists, neo-Marxists)
	The three ladies (fairies)	Indirect coercive institutions (SRI, SIE, SPP, OMS)
	Monstratos and his helpers	Direct coercive institutions, the Army, the Police
	Pandemic	Covid 19
Adjuvants	Priests, initiates	Priests of Isis-Osiris versus the Clergy of the Christian Churches
	Children	Guides on the path of the new world that bring harmony, progress, confidence in the common future of mankind

Although most researchers rather accredit the interpretation of the work from the perspective of symbols and allegories related to the esotericism of the Masonic cult, as Deb (2007) observes, arguments for the Christian version can be brought thanks to the multiple hidden meanings and left open by the author.

Biographic and historical proofs:

1. Although Mozart was confirmed as a Mason in the largest and most influential lodge in Vienna, he attended a smaller and less important lodge, but which was the meeting place of those who believed in the Catholic Enlightenment (Till 1995, 125). "Although these two allegiances seem contradictory, Mozart remain both a devoted Catholic and a passionate believer in Enlightenment throughout his life" (Deb 2007, 8)
2. Many of the numerological symbols considered of esoteric origin such as the numbers 1, 3, 7, 18 can also be interpreted from the point of view of Christian symbolism: 1 - Divine unity, 3 Trinity, including the basic key Es major can be and is symbolically attached to this number; the three chords of three notes each in the opening of the overture. In fact, these numbers are also found in fairy tales around the world and, first of all, the work *The Magic Flute* is a fairy tale.
3. Sources of inspiration from Christian worship music, for example, the song inspired by a Lutheran song from 1524 entitled *Ach Gott, von Himmelsieh darrein* which is interpreted by the two Knights in armor (priests, servants of Sarastro) in a moment of ceremonial solemnity.



Tenor.
ZWEI GEHARNISCHE MÄNNER. Der, welcher wandert diese Strasse voll Beschwer-den, wird rein durch

Bass.
Der, welcher wandert diese Strasse voll Beschwer-den, wird rein durch

*) Choral: „Ach Gott, vom Himmel stell darrein.“

Figure 8. Coral *Ach Gott, von Himmelsieh darrein* fragment processed by Mozart in the scene of the two knights.

4. Probably, as Deb (2007, 11) remarks, Mozart suggests that we wanted to reunite under the sign of the Bible the idea of the initiatory path beneath Divine protection, through the following verse from Isaiah (43:2): “When thou passest through the waters, I will be thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee; when thou wakest through the fire; thou shall not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee”.

Epilogue:

After the premiere that took place on the evening of October 3, 2020, at the Hungarian Opera in Cluj-Napoca, approximately 30 cases of illness were reported. The monster Covid 19 laughed a little at those who invoked him. Fortunately, all those affected were healed passing through trials, we like to believe, with faith in the power of Love, Goodness and Truth.

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