

New Magic Flute at 'original tempi'

by Kathy Wolfe

Die Zauberflöte

by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart;
conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras
Scottish Chamber Orchestra and Chorus
Telarc Digital
2 compact discs CD-80302; \$27.76

With so many recordings of Mozart's masterpiece, why another *Zauberflöte* (*Magic Flute*)? Telarc presents its first foray into opera as a return to Mozart's ideas for the first time on a modern digital recording, "the most magical performance of the *Magic Flute* since the evening of Sept. 30, 1791." While not played at Mozart's pitch of C=256 (A=430) or upon original instruments, the recording does feature a smaller Mozartean chamber orchestra, and what conductor Charles Mackerras in his album notes says are Mozart's "original tempi." These are much faster than is "traditional." Since "traditional" could be any sort of Romantic nonsense handed down from the late 19th century, researching Mozart's own ideas has merit. The recording features some of today's finest singers, notably soprano June Anderson as Queen of the Night, Barbara Hendricks as Pamina, and baritone Thomas Allen as Papageno. Jerry Hadley as Tamino and Robert Lloyd as Sarastro are not quite in the same category. The sound quality is magnificent.

The recording starts well. Mackerras in the overture achieves, at a very brisk clip, a differentiation of orchestral voices and phrasing which is audible despite the pace. Portions of it take on the intended quality of soaring for which rapid execution is often necessary. The opening trio of the Three Ladies, too, maintains this quality, but that is because Mozart intended to have three separate voices quickly echoing one another. For the rest, however, the tempi are a problem.

Is there an absolute tempo?

Sir Charles Mackerras, born in the U.S. of Australian parents, debuted at the English National Opera (Sadler's Wells) and was music director of the ENO from 1970-1977, as well as conducting frequently for the BBC. He was knighted in 1979. In his notes to the Telarc *Zauberflöte*, Mackerras criticizes "interpreters [who] have traditionally instilled a lofty, uplifting feeling into the music," for Mozart, he says,

was far more "sophisticated" than that:

"Quite early in the history of *Die Zauberflöte*, we find Nissen, who married Mozart's widow Constanze, objecting to the excessively slow tempi of Pamina's aria 'Ach, ich fühl's.' " In 1815, a certain Gottfried Weber found the aria "boring" when taken slowly and suggested a measurement of tempo equivalent in modern metronomic terms to an eighth note=132. Three months later came a reply (anonymous) to the musical journal in which Weber wrote, confirming that the writer had heard *The Magic Flute* under Mozart's direction, and that the composer had indeed taken the aria quickly and passionately. Further, the anonymous correspondent mentioned that at the time of writing (1815) the tempi marked "Andante" and "Alla Breve" were currently being taken much too slowly, contrary to Mozart's practice.

"The instruments we play today are more sonorous and our voices are trained to be more powerful than those of Mozart's time, but this added sonority has brought a certain ponderousness to the general sound, with an inevitable slowing down of the tempi . . . an approximation to the tempi of Mozart's time seems necessary if we are properly to express the spirit of his age."

What, in fact, were Mozart's tempi, is not within the scope of a short review. Taking these historiographical conclusions at face value, the question remains: How insistent was Mozart upon maintaining some kind of "absolute tempo"? Did he write with a fixed, metronomic beat in mind (even if he did write before metronomes)?

The Mackerras recording's problems start with the development of individual characters after the Three Ladies' trio. The whole point of the Ladies, after all, is that they don't *have* individual characters. Thomas Allen's opening Papageno aria did not work because it had to be spoken, not sung, it went by so fast, a shame for that rich baritone. June Anderson, as any of her Donizetti and Rossini roles will tell you, is probably one of the fastest coloraturas alive. But even her Queen of the Night sounded rushed in both arias, during which there was no time to allow the voice to "sound." Instead of hearing the different registers of each voice, and the difference in nuances between one voice and another, and voices of the orchestra, what is heard is everyone rushing to keep up.

The famous quintet "Hm! Hm! Hm! Hm!" in which Papageno's mouth is locked, was too fast for the audience, not just for the singers. There was not time enough for an ear to distinguish Papageno's voice from that of Tamino, and to hear the difference between their exchange and that of the Ladies. It was not just the speed, but that there was no give, "stretch," within the tempo.

Mozart wrote for particular singers, which means he had to deal with a wide variety of ability to execute certain effects. Therefore, he had a range of tempi, and no absolute tempo. Mozart would never have put an absolute need to keep to particular tempi above the need to impart poetic dialogue to hearers, to create transparency of voices.