
Review

‘The Philosopher’s Stone’: Mozart’s newly discovered opera

by David M. Shavin

The Philosopher’s Stone, or The Enchanted Isle

by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann Baptist Henneberg, Benedikt Schack, Franz Xaver Gerl, and Emanuel Schikaneder

A fairy-tale opera from 1790, rediscovered by David J. Buch

Boston Baroque, Martin Pearlman, Telarc CD

The discovery of Mozart’s significant role in the opera *The Philosopher’s Stone* casts a whole new light on his famous opera *The Magic Flute*. This recording presents the long-lost half-sister. It is also something of a minor miracle that the opera, a product of the collaboration of five composers, is as delightful as it is.

In 1997, musicologist David Buch announced his discovery of an old score of the 1790 opera, *The Philosopher’s Stone*, wherein a copyist had identified which of five composers, including Mozart, had composed which part. In 1998, the Boston Baroque, under Martin Pearlman, recorded the opera with period instruments. And in 1999, Telarc released the CD. The five composers stayed together as a team in producing, in 1791, Mozart’s *The Magic Flute*—of which Mozart was the sole composer.

Two major questions arise: Why would Mozart work with a team of five composers? And what changes occurred in the “sequel,” when Mozart assumed full control?

The ‘Magic Flute’ team

What was Mozart doing in joining this compositional team in 1790? Some background is needed. The other four composers were members of Emmanuel Schikaneder’s acting troupe at the Theater auf der Weiden, in a working-class suburb of Vienna. Mozart and Schikaneder had significant connections to each other, and to a common republican project of educating and uplifting citizens.

Previous to Buch’s discovery, it was assumed that Mozart had contributed to Schikaneder only one of the works in *The*

Philosopher’s Stone, the famous “Miau! Miau!” duet that opens the Finale of Act II. (This assumption had been based upon a known copy of this “cat duet” in Mozart’s hand.) Since Mozart had contributed individual works to several operas by others, nothing much was made of this. Now, Buch has identified Mozart as the main composer of the Act II Finale, along with the Act II duet, “Nun, liebes Weibchen.” Schikaneder, who is credited with two of the works in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, was the creator of the comic figure Papageno, in *The Magic Flute*.

Further, the other three collaborators in *The Philosopher’s Stone* also played major roles in *The Magic Flute* production the following year. Johann Baptist Henneberg, who has 10 of the 24 attributions in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, including most of Act I, was the conductor for *The Magic Flute* (except when Mozart himself chose to conduct). Franz Xaver Gerl, who is identified as composing four works in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, sang the bass role of Zarastro in *The Magic Flute*. Finally, Benedikt Schack, with five attributions in *The Philosopher’s Stone*, was the tenor, Tamino, in *The Magic Flute*. How far Mozart’s role extended in the compositions attributed to the others is not known. However, as Pearlman relates in the text included with the CD, evidently Mozart would arrive at Schack’s residence and, in the few minutes of waiting for Schack to dress to go out, he would playfully compose music into Schack’s unfinished opera scores.

The libretti, Schikaneder, and Wieland

Schikaneder created the libretti for both operas, drawing upon Christoph Martin Wieland’s popular collection of tales, *Dschinnistan*, which had lately been published (between 1786 and 1789). However, Schikaneder’s reliance on Wieland for material is the tip of the iceberg. He probably owed the direction of his whole life to Wieland. When Schikaneder was 15 years old, in 1766, Wieland’s translation of 22 Shakespeare plays launched a revolution in German cultural life. The translation was published in Berlin by Friedrich Nicolai, who had been allied with the playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, and his close collaborator, Moses Mendelssohn, since the mid-1750s, in efforts to build a German culture capable of

sustaining a republic. The three had launched a cultural journal in the late 1750s, to wage war against the low-grade “soap-opera” fare being peddled to the masses, and against high-brow, effete, and decadent fare, such as the influence of the French materialist and cynic, Voltaire, upon the king, Frederick the Great. The publication of Wieland’s Shakespeare collection in German was followed the next year, 1767, by an explosion of cultural optimism from Nicolai’s publication of Mendelssohn’s *Phaedon*.

Schikaneder caught the acting bug no later than 1769, joining an acting troupe in 1773 to perform Shakespeare. When, in 1789, he assumed directorship of the Theater auf der Weiden, he put on at least four plays based upon Wieland within two years. Schikaneder created three of the plays, and a fourth, *Oberon*, was turned into a libretto by Karl Giesecke, another member of his troupe. Giesecke, also in the premiere cast of *The Magic Flute*, later became a famous professor of mineralogy, upon whom Goethe relied for unusual mineralogical samples. Giesecke had been educated, during the American Revolution, at Göttingen, a hotbed of Benjamin Franklin’s collaborators in Europe. (Wieland’s *Oberon* attracted another Franklin admirer, soon after Giesecke had turned it into a libretto: In 1799-1800, it was translated into English by the U.S. Ambassador to Prussia, John Quincy Adams.)

The larger ‘Shakespeare’ project

Mozart, six years younger than Schikaneder, shared in the benefits of the republican networks that launched the Wieland Shakespeare and the Mendelssohn *Phaedon*. Mozart’s father Leopold obtained a set of Wieland’s works (from a friend, Salomon Gessner) in 1766, immediately after they appeared in print. When his son, Wolfgang, at 21 years of age, performed for Wieland in Mannheim (December 1777), Wieland declared that meeting Mozart and hearing him play was “a real piece of good fortune.” Discussions ensued around making the German language sing, and around breaking down the walls between language and music, but plans for collaboration on a *singspiel* weren’t realized, as Mozart left for a timely project in Paris, involving Lafayette’s circles and the American Revolution.

Meanwhile, Schikaneder’s theater activities between 1769 and 1780 included all the new plays of Lessing, a couple by Goethe, and many Shakespeare plays—including his favorites, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *King Lear*. He performed in many towns and cities, including Augsburg, Nuremberg, and Munich. In 1779, in the Slovenian town of Ljubljana, he led his troupe in a performance of a play, *Winter Quarters in America*. Though this reviewer is not familiar with the play, its title at least strongly suggests that Schikaneder and his audiences followed the American Revolution’s developments, including the critical winter at Valley Forge, 1777-78.

In the autumn of 1780, Schikaneder met up with Mozart,



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, who collaborated with a team of five composers in *The Philosopher’s Stone*. Mozart and others among the team were part of a common republican project of educating and uplifting citizens.

when he brought to Mozart’s Salzburg, plays including *Hamlet*, and Lessing’s *Emilia Galotti*. The Mozart family attended these plays. Schikaneder provided them with season passes, and he socialized frequently at Leopold Mozart’s home. It was at that time that Mozart made his first known contribution (an aria) to one of Schikaneder’s productions.

Meanwhile, Emperor Joseph II had established a German National Theater in Vienna in 1776, per discussions with Lessing. Intense political fighting surrounded the policy of bringing Shakespeare, Goethe, and Lessing to German subjects. Frederick the Great weighed in against such a loving fight for the hearts and minds of the population, with a 1780 pronouncement, “De la littérature allemande,” intoning: “The rules of the theater are not arbitrary. They are in Aristotle’s *Poetics*.” And in Vienna, Joseph II’s enemies attacked Lessing in 1780 as a paid propagandist for Jews. In the spring of 1781, Mozart was recruited to Vienna by the principals of the National Theater: von Sonnenfels, van Swieten, Count Cobenzl (the Court and State Chancellor), and G. Stephanie, the librettist for Mozart’s first opera there, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*. He lived with friends of Moses Mendelssohn, the Arnsteins, who provided him with a copy of Men-

delssohn's *Phaedon*.

Schikaneder visited Vienna in 1783, and there performed a very successful *Hamlet*. This very likely caught Emperor Joseph II's attention, as the play was politically sensitive in Vienna. On an earlier occasion (according to Mozart's letter to his father of Nov. 10, 1781), the Emperor was to have had *Hamlet* performed for the visit of Russia's Grand Duke Paul. However, the Shakespearean actor, Brockmann, told Joseph II that he could not go through with it, because the Grand Duke was, in real life, already playing the role! Joseph II appreciated Brockmann's insight and wit so much, that he awarded him 50 ducats on the spot.

In 1784, Schikaneder again impressed Joseph II with a version of Friedrich Schiller's *Cabals and Love* that the Emperor had seen in Pressburg; the Emperor then invited Schikaneder to revive German theater back in Vienna. Joseph II had come under intense pressure to cease such attempts to uplift his German-speaking subjects, after the tremendous success of Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* in the summer of 1782. (This pressure included spy charges, arrests, and banishments that summer, against Mozart's collaborators.)

Quite courageously, Schikaneder opened his first stay in Vienna, in November 1784, with the same *Abduction!* Shortly thereafter, in February 1785, his attempt to perform Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* as a German play, was prohibited by Count Pergen, the head of the secret police. Although Joseph II proceeded to promote him for the National Theater itself, Schikaneder was second to Brockmann, the lead actor there, and, from 1786 to 1789, Schikaneder left Vienna to tour his own troupe. Benedikt Schack joined the troupe when the tour reached Salzburg in 1786. In these years, Schikaneder added the new playwright Friedrich Schiller to his repertoire of Lessing, Goethe, and Shakespeare — although Schikaneder was known for introducing his own alterations into the plays.

In 1788, Johann Friedel, who had been in Schikaneder's troupe in Vienna in 1784-85, opened the Theater auf der Weiden with Schiller's *Kabale und Liebe* and Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*. When Friedel died in 1789, Schikaneder returned to Vienna, with Schack and Gerl in his troupe, to run the theater. Financial backing was secured from Joseph von Bauernfeld (whose son Eduard later became Franz Schubert's good friend). The July 1789 opening was *The Two Antons* by Schack and Gerl. Mozart enjoyed this opera, and later wrote his K. 613 Piano Variations based upon the most popular melody from this singspiel, "Ein Weib ist das herrlichste Ding auf der Welt" ("A woman is the most magnificent thing on earth"). So, Mozart was in some working relationship with this troupe when Schikaneder first arrived back in Vienna, and might well have seen other productions of that season, including Schiller's *Don Carlos* and the play based on Wieland's *Oberon*.

Mozart had attended the performances of Schikaneder's troupe earlier, in 1784-85, and undoubtedly welcomed the

plays and *singspiels* at the Theater auf der Weiden from 1788 to 1790. His renewed collaboration with Schikaneder on *The Philosopher's Stone* occurred in the late spring of 1790. Given the lifelong commitments of these men, it is scarcely surprising that Mozart would seize the opportunity to collaborate in bringing quality culture to the working-class audience of the Theater auf der Weiden. However, the way in which Mozart uniquely transformed the same basic array of talent and material into his 1791 opera *The Magic Flute*, puts into perspective his leadership role. Schikaneder's troupe never afterwards reached the heights of its political and artistic success of the fall of 1791, nor could it recover from the elimination of Mozart, nine successful weeks into the opera.

Fall 1791: a turning point for the 'America' project

Mozart's *The Magic Flute* intervened into a highly charged Vienna. In France, Lafayette still had the last, best hope for carrying the American revolutionary fight for republicanism into Europe. The National Guard held out the opportunity of a Presidential role for Lafayette. France was just at the verge of crossing over into the Jacobin terror. In Vienna, the head of the secret police, Pergen, had been dismissed by Emperor Leopold — whose sister, Marie Antoinette, was under house arrest in Paris. In Prague, Mozart's opera *La Clemenza di Tito* was performed for festivities for the Emperor. Mozart was deeply involved in the strategic situation. In fact, in this period, which included the creation of *The Magic Flute*, he had confided to his wife, that he thought that he was being poisoned?

Would leaders of Europe choose to develop their lands by renouncing the "empire" model of enforced backwardness, and investing in educating, and raising the skill levels of, the populations? Or would oligarchical agents manipulate leaders and populations around simplistic "left" and "right" positions, where liberty was Jacobinism, and success was keeping others down? Simply stated, Mozart's *The Magic Flute* addressed the question of whether the source of the universal emotion of love in every human being, is also the basis for reason, for creative mentation, and hence for the scientific accomplishments necessary for development of one and all. Individuals either developed their emotions to be thinking citizens in a republic, or they would be ruled by their emotions as subjects, where survival meant making others into beggars. Mozart brought to this situation a unique leadership capability, which he put on stage. And the population of Vienna responded with excitement.

Mozart's transformation of 'The Philosopher's Stone'

In *The Philosopher's Stone* of 1790, love ensnares humans, and, if they follow it through its twists and turns, matters will turn out, magically, for the best. The philosopher's stone itself is the alchemical knowledge to conquer death, and

it was typical of Schikaneder to employ such a device; but it is not science. The audience viewing this opera finds their hearts touched; they laugh, they suffer, and they leave optimistic, as things have fortunately worked out. But, in *The Magic Flute*, the workings of love are not left to fortune. Mozart brings to bear his struggle to master his own genius, from his intense working through of Johann Sebastian Bach's contrapuntal science. In coming to know the non-magical workings of his own genius, he gained a unique insight into the love his Creator bore him, and all men. The power of love, and of mind, were fundamentally the same.

When the magic flute arrives onstage, and is presented to Tamino, it is not magical, but much more. Mozart reveals the love and power of his heart and mind in the signature trio, sung by Tamino and two guards ("Der, welcher wandelt diese Strasse," "He who travels this route"), coming in on top of the unmistakable C-minor "Adagio." This section powerfully refers to Mozart's scientific re-working of Bach, when he entered the cave of his own "natural" creative processes. Pamina, having conquered her own demons, reunites with Tamino at this point, and presents him with the magic flute. Armed with this newly discovered power, the couple bravely proceeds into the cave for their mortal trial. Beauty, and the sensual world can ensnare, but, followed with all our heart and mind, it affords mankind the power of creation. Mozart knew this, because he worked to discover such in the laboratory his Creator had provided him.

By contrast, *The Philosopher's Stone* comes close — without getting there. Certainly, the five collaborators in *The Philosopher's Stone* celebrated the power and optimism of music. One can learn a lot from what Mozart was working with in Schikaneder's troupe, before he transformed it. In *The Philosopher's Stone*, the flute plays a similar role, this time of a magical bird given to the people by the god Astromonte, which has the power to discover virtue. It sings only to the most pure, and so, its beauty can lead humans in the right direction. While magical, it is not *The Magic Flute*.

Charming, but not transfigurative

The music in *The Philosopher's Stone* is almost always charming, and occasionally poignant. Mozart's collaborators certainly benefitted from working with him, but they must also be given credit for whatever they brought to the task. When Schack introduces the bird who will sing to the most pure virgin, and four maidens get into a squabble over who will prove most pure, one is convinced that this is a case where Mozart was visiting Schack, and waiting for him to dress while he added to Schack's composition. (Surely, when the audience for *The Magic Flute* heard, in the opening scene, the three maidens quarrel over the handsome Tamino, they would have remembered the squabble of the four maidens from the previous season.) Schack's following chorus is handled most effectively — where, just after Astromonte's Genie has instructed the people to pursue virtue ("Tugend"), the benefi-

cent power of the god Astromonte is celebrated, and, in particular, the crowd revels in knowing that the ways of the god can be discerned by happily watching his messenger springing upwards, and soaring round the Sun. But hinting that humans can begin learning the ways of divinity by observing the heavenly motions, is the closest *The Philosopher's Stone* gets to what Mozart accomplishes in *The Magic Flute*.

Henneberg's aria for the heroine, Nadine ("A maiden who prates of love, And dares not all for her beloved, Never feels in her heart what she says, Her inmost feelings remain as cold as ice . . .") is handled tenderly, and also effectively; but the role lacks the sublimeness of Mozart's Pamina. In response to Nadine, Schack's aria for the hero, Nadir, is quite heartfelt, and approaches some of Tamino's responses to Pamina. And Franz Xaver Gerl shows himself in the same league as the others with his aria for the hero, Nadir, in his plea to the gods for his Nadine. And what of Schikaneder's compositional skills? His aria for the heroine, Nadine ("My one and only . . ."), even though a simple lament, uses the oboe and harp most sensitively. Especially noteworthy, is Schack's ominous, clanging chorus of the eight spirits of hell, as they forge a sword of death and revenge. (Here, the Papageno-figure, Lubano, upon hearing this unholy chorus from Hell, delivers the comic aside to the audience, "What a charming concert"!)

As Schack's techniques sound hauntingly similar to passages from Mozart's *Requiem*, one is tempted again to ascribe this either to some direct collaboration with Mozart on this chorus, or at least, to happy inspiration from collaborative work.

Even the "unattributed" composer of the precious march of "Lilliputians" deserves praise. (The reference to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is explicit, with a shipwreck, and the reference to "the land of Lilliput!" ["das Lillibutische Land!"]) Coming right before Mozart's first identified contribution (the cat duet), it is more than tempting to attribute this delightful pastry of a march to Mozart himself — along with the (also unattributed) powerful aria of revenge that follows his duet.

However, despite many such passages that pleasantly surprised this reviewer (having been skeptical when I heard of this group effort), there is no transfigurative moment in *The Philosopher's Stone*. Instead, there is much joy at the fortunate turn of events. While the two texts, both drawn from Wieland, may be very similar, epistemologically, Mozart transformed the flute-bird of *The Philosopher's Stone*, using his own worked-out, scientific "magic," to craft the flute of *The Magic Flute*. Buch, Pearlman, and the Boston Baroque have provided a happiness, if only for putting into fresh relief the unique gift Mozart gave us. When you sing happy birthday for Mozart on Jan. 27, forget the silly ditty, and sing it the way Wolfgang Amadeus would enjoy it: Hear Mozart and friends working together in *The Philosopher's Stone*, then hear *The Magic Flute* for the first time all over again, and you'll know the happiness of Mozart's having been born. And your choice of song and toast for the occasion will probably also work out most happily.