

High/Low Mash-Up: Magic Flute and Ariadne auf Naxos

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Try to picture this: being a teenager, growing up in a conservative religious culture, and living in an American suburb baking under a the sun in a high mountain desert valley—it's got to be one of the most fiendishly devised experiments for alienation and weirdness ever cooked up by the warped minds of adult human beings. Your hormones are ragingly out of wack, and you're supposed to keep them chastely in check; you go to church and sit in pews singing homely, 19th century upbeat hymns with adults stuffed uncomfortably in their Sunday best, while at the same time the crazed lyrics and high octane music of the Doors and Jimi Hendrix you listened to during the week is echoing in your head; and to top off the strangeness and confusion of your misery, on Saturday afternoons, with the sun beating down and frying your brain pan, it's your job to scoop the dog's poop, weed the flower beds and clip the lawn so that your yard conforms to unwritten suburban laws of appropriate public display, even though, behind the seemingly sturdy façade of painted trim and well-laid brick walls of your family's ranch style bungalow, your dad's a down beat alcoholic, your parents' marriage is on the rocks, and your older siblings are scrambling desperately to get out of there.

Given this scene, try to imagine what could possibly be going on in my head and soul—while shoveling shit, digging up weeds and mowing the lawn—from the radio, that I had turned up full blast, there comes this weekly broadcast: “Texaco brings you live from the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Square in New York City... *La Boheme*, *Carmen*, *Don Giovanni*, *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*, etc. etc. Can you imagine? *What are they singing about?* What is this unearthly, so-not-suburban, gentile, over-the-top emotive, non-pop music? And why, listening to it, did it make me feel so unhappy and elated at the same time?

When I finally got a crack at New York City, I was seventeen, alone, just having shed my braces, and a young man with one thing on his mind—well two things—first, a dinner in Chinatown, and second—a live performance at the Met. I would have seen anything; it turned out to be Richard Strauss's *Der Rosencavalier*. I could only afford standing room at the back of the hall, but as fate turned out, a couple left after the first act, and gave me a ticket that happened to be the best seat in the house. And for the next two hours, I was transfixed by an alien and intimate beauty; a marriage of touching theatricality and gorgeous late Romantic music played on the stage and rolling out from the orchestra pit in one overwhelming wave after another.

I have no idea how I ever traveled back to Rhode Island and my university dorm room after that performance. But several months later, I landed a summer job helping to build sets for the Santa Fe Opera festival, where from behind the scenes and in the audience I got to witness how operas are put together; how human egos, disciplined art, and stage scenery pounded together with nail guns and hurried paint jobs are herded together to create something which, though lasting only a few summer nights in an opera hall on the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, that fleeting, strange beauty lingers still.

You'd think I'm an opera nut, but I'm not. There's a lot in the repertoire that just doesn't do it for me. As well, at \$50 and more, you never know, the cast or direction may be uneven—so it's a crap shoot; and it's high brow to boot. I get it; it's strange and pretentious, etc. But when it works; when it all comes together—music, singers, libretto, stage design and direction—an opera can be enthralling, moving, ecstatic—scandalously beautiful and exalting.

We Unitarians are an interesting collection of people; inclined by history and disposition to privilege reason, pragmatic action and the word, wary of being taken in by emotion and ritual, by “smells and bells...” And so when I say that today is Epiphany Sunday, it may mean little to

us or it dredges up memories of church, liturgies and creeds left behind for reasons known intimately well.

But let's linger for a moment. Epiphany is a sudden and important manifestation or realization; and this Sunday, in the western Christian world, is the feast of the Three Wise Men who scanned the heavens and read its portentous signs. As the story goes, a great, lustrous star told them a new king had been born. They journeyed to pay homage first, in the obvious place—they go a palace, only to discover that the star was pointing to a different site and royalty—the kind you find among the poor, the marginalized; the kind where families can't find a room in the inn and give birth to babies in barns. There they paid their respects and leave their treasure to something great manifest in the humble and small.

So here's an ancient mash-up of the high and low—kings rubbing shoulders with shepherds, royalty in a barnyard, treasure laden camels from the Orient standing in the muck alongside chickens, cows, and sheep. It makes you smile thinking about it; there's something ludicrous and holy at the same time all mixed up together—it's a scene ripe for a Monty Python sketch like in *The Life of Brian*, or in the *Second Shepherd's Play* written in the early 15th century and performed for audiences delighted by the antics and language of its rough hewn shepherds who, when finally confronted by angels, a newborn infant and its post partum mother drop the shenanigans and fall to their knees in wonder.

There are some things, persons, and events that compel us to set aside the profane because an epiphany takes place; and what's unusual and compelling about them—or so the nativity story, for example, is telling us, that both high and low born, aristocrat and proletarian, man and woman alike can see it, experience it, and be moved and transformed.

Ah, but to get there...that takes perilous journeys and a mixed cast of characters spanning genders and class we can identify with individually and according to our various stations in life.

And in the case of an opera daring enough to take on a high/low mash up: it takes scenery, singers, direction, and music that reaches out and speaks to us and draws us all thrillingly in. There are two operas I can't get out of my head and will use as examples: Mozart's *The Magic Flute* from 1791 and Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos* first performed in 1911 and then revised in 1916. The dates are significant; in both epochs, revolutions in politics, economics and culture were overthrowing aristocratic orders and hierarchies. What kind of stories and music could serve as bridges through the chaos? What kind of people, associations, structures and moral relations would or should emerge from the wreckage to survive and thrive?

In *The Magic Flute*, three couples play out these questions and struggle for a way through. The first pair represents an old order of things divided into binaries of light and darkness, passion and reason, male and female, represented by a bitterly estranged couple—The Queen of the Night and Sarastro the Priest of the Temple of the Sun. Between them they have a daughter Pamina over whose fate they contend like foes in a bad divorce. Two young men enter the scene, thrown together by circumstance: the first—a prince named Tamino, the other—a simple good hearted child of nature named Papageno. Each is incomplete: Papageno just wants to settle down to a good meal, a glass of wine and a bed with a mate, his weibschen, his Papagena, and have children. While Tamino—he's looking for a higher cause, a reason to live, a role to grow into that is equal to his noble potential. As things turn out, Papageno and Tamino need each other to survive and achieve their goals; and it's Pamina, daughter of the Queen of the Night and the Priest Sarastro, who ultimately holds the key.

These three pairs: Tamino and Pamina, Papageno and Papagena, the Queen and High Priest will all go through trials and suffering. The elder set—will they be able to let go their fierce hold over their child, as well as their power over traditionally separate spheres of night and light, dark passion and calculating reason so that something new, some kind of reconciliation in

the next generation will emerge? And the young couples? Will Papageno finally get to eat, drink that glass of wine and find his Papagena? And Pamina and Tamino—will they survive their elders' stratagems? Will they pass successfully through mortal perils and trials of initiation to attain enlightenment and fully autonomous adulthood, equally united as a pair?

We'll return to *The Magic Flute*, but for now—we fast forward 120 years, and to Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. (*Ariadne auf Naxos: opening bars of the overture*)

Like *The Magic Flute*, it's an opera in two acts. The setting is an evening at the palatial home of the richest man in Vienna who's hosting an entertainment to impress members of the upper crust, the .01%. In one night, he's ordered a grand dinner to be followed by a song and dance comedy troupe, whose act will be followed, in turn, by the premier of a high brow opera, and that will be topped off by a fireworks display. Think Jim Pattison hosting a dinner extravaganza, Lady Gaga, a Wagner opera, and the Festival of Lights fireworks in English Bay all in one evening. A bit excessive and incongruous?—yes; Why?—because he can, and his events planner has arranged the details.

But a problem arises. There's one detail our unseen host cares very much about—the fireworks. They will take place at precisely 9 pm. The dinner drags on, as dinners' will, and so the order comes down from on high that the comedy troupe and the opera company will go on stage and perform at the same time. How on earth, and at the last minute?—that's of no account to our wealthy master of the universe types—actors, musicians, singers and composer will just have to sort out on their own. They've been paid to entertain; and the show must go on.

As you can imagine, chaos ensues. The comedians gloat that the opera types are getting knocked off their high horse. The prima donna refuses to share the stage with Zerbinetta, the female comedienne lead; but then again, she also has no choice. The young idealistic composer, who's written this high-brow opera, is beside himself, out of his mind with disappointment,

betrayal and despair; but he too, has to make drastic, last minute cuts in the score, and can't imagine how—all his lofty ideals are going to be brought down to earth and dragged in the mud, or so he thinks, until, in a deliriously beautiful exchange, Zerbinetta—the ultimate, vivacious tease, and the composer, high on his vision of an abandoned woman and young god giving themselves to each other in the mystery of transformation brought about by love—for a few aching moments all pretence drops away between the coquette and the composer.

“Is my heart really in the part I play,” Zerbinetta asks. “People think they know me, but they're blind. I, too, long for one love alone, for someone to whom I be could true to the very end.” In that moment, that confession, the great gulf, that yawning chasm the composer believes separates high and low arts, people and gods, earth and the heavens, collapses and conjoins. “Who can understand the depths of existence,” he sings. “I see everything differently now... The world is delightful... And what then is music? There's so much in the world that can't be put into words,” he sings, “and music is the art that brings people of daring together.”

But that moment ends; the curtain of the first act comes down and the two troupes of performers must, in what follows, for the entertainment of the rich, put on a show mashing up low-brow, sexy slapstick and high-end romantic opera—that's the second act of *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In the prologue, after watching back stage politics, the antic collision of opera singers and comedians, the crass, commanding power of the uber rich, the servile, accommodating situation imposed on the players, and the high-minded ideals and despair of the composer—after all this, we become the spectators of the opera-within-an-opera in the second act.

Earlier in this service, (after the mediation) Richard sang the Harlequin's aria—Harlequin is a member of the comedy troupe that incongruously finds itself on the island of Naxos where they discover the abandoned, disconsolate Ariadne—wracked with grief and wishing only to die. His simple, heartfelt response is to cheer her up with a song in which he says: you (and we) can

and must endure the whole, real range of human emotion and experience—to be dead to that, to extinguish one’s heart to life’s joys and sorrows, before life has run its run its course—she just can’t—“you must live once again,” he tells her. All the more so, given what Ariadne sang just before the Harlequin’s solo: “There was a thing of beauty called Theseus and Ariadne,—“that walked in light and rejoiced in life,” she sings. It will give you an idea of just how gorgeous Strauss’s music can be: *Ein Shoenes war...*

Imagine what she and all of us would lose if we give up on that! love and loss, darkness and light, forgetting and memory. Not long after Ariadne’s achingly beautiful aria, the comedienne Zerbinetta, in a show stopping, eight minute solo, tries to convince Ariadne there are other fish in the sea, other men, and loves. Ariadne can’t accept this, but then the impossible happens: the young god Bacchus—the very embodiment of the sensual, of agriculture and wine—comes to island, and the mystery of love does its work: Ariadne’s longing for death is transformed into a readiness to yield once more and finally to love. And Bacchus, through this utterly human being and her emotions, is made fully conscious of his divinity for the first time. As this transformation, this epiphany, takes place, the comedians, and even Zerbinetta, along with the rest of us, can only look on in awe; and here we recall the declaration of the Composer in the Prologue: “How else in the world could one become divine, except through such an experience?” The end of the opera attempts to proves him right.

Now back to Mozart, *The Magic Flute*, and then some closing observations.

The glory of *The Magic Flute*, like Strauss’s *Ariadne*, is that Mozart gives each person and pair his deep, delighted, copious attention and utmost care—writing great solos and ensembles that give voice to rage and jealousy, naiveté and wisdom, longing and attainment. Mozart understands and loves them all; high and low, rational and earthy, male and female. In fact, the truly significant change that takes place in the opera is the role of Pamina—the daughter

of the Queen and the High priest Sarastro. Her progress from naiveté, despair and weakness to bold wisdom and numinous power becomes a central issue of the drama and the inspiration of the most intensely charged music in the score: Here's an example: "*Ach, ich fühl's, es ist verschwunden*" —“Ah, I feel it, all is lost. Love's joy is gone forever.”

But more is at stake in *The Magic Flute* than the overcoming of obstacles to the attainment of love placed in the way of our youthful pairs by the stratagems and power of an older generation. Achieving wisdom, beauty and strength, celebrated in the concluding words of the opera—that is, the progress of the human soul from the darkness of ignorance to the light of understanding, Mozart is telling us, are precisely the goals the younger generation should be aspiring to, seeking and making their own.

Near the opera's finale, Tamino's preparing to undergo trails of fire and water, when two imposing men in armor instruct and warn him of what's to come. And speaking of mash-ups: listen to this music. *Der, welcher wandert ...*

First the orchestra enters, playing a fugue-like motif taken directly from traditionally Roman Catholic liturgical music...And then the two armored men begin to sing—it's music from a Lutheran, Protestant hymn—there it is, Catholic and Protestant brought together by Mozart in an extraordinary ecumenical counterpoint. And the words?—straight from the canon of the 18th Enlightenment. : “He who treads this world full of care.../if he can overcome the fear of death/soars heavenward...And then, he will be able to dedicate himself entirely to enlightenment.” Great stuff, but did you hear the pronouns?—it's all male. And here's exactly where Mozart throws an unexpected twist, and truly enlightened view into all this masculine folderol: Tamino can't do it alone. And so Mozart brings Pamina to the rescue, bearing the magic flute. For the 18th century (and today), this is real feminism, and recalls the Unitarian Margaret Fuller's words written a full fifty years after the composition of *The Magic Flute*:

A new manifestation is at hand, a new hour is come. When man and woman may regard one another as sister and brother, able both to appreciate and prophesy to one another . . . We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to woman as freely as to man.”

And the tool to pull down that “arbitrary barrier?” There’s no doubt in Mozart’s mind—it’s the magic flute; it’s music. *Wir wandeln durch de Tonnes Macht* . . .

Pamina and Tamino sing: “By the power of music we joyously walk through death’s dark night.” And with that assurance and beauty, together they disarm the guards who join them in singing, and together, Pamina and Tamino pass through the trials, achieve enlightenment, and stride on to glorious conclusion of *The Magic Flute*.

All right, some concluding thoughts: Opera was conceived and created by a small group of Italian humanists, including Galileo’s father, in the late 1500s. Their project was to revive, re-gift and transform European culture with the great myths and virtues of classical Greece and Rome through the medium of these stories set to music and song blended together in a seamless work of art. At the outset, it was directed to the good taste, high-brow culture and self-regard of aristocratic courts.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the opera. You see, with few exceptions, writers, composers, musicians and singers are not high born—they’re not aristocrats or wealthy—they’re low born or middle class riff-raff, historically treated like servants; and as we know, servants can only take so much disdain and condescension from their masters before they push back, misbehave and transgress. That bright shining line which you, on your thrones and executive suites, think utterly separate us, and privilege your high status and lifestyle, is a social construction, a fiction. Our lives and loves, our aspirations and loss are as rich, distressing, joyous and meaningful as those of the high and mighty, human or divine. And so we’ll write and sing about young artists and writers drinking and dying in Parisian attics in *La Boheme*, or of a prostitute bearing a mixed race baby abandoned by a ship’s captain in *Madame Butterfly*, or a

servant lovingly preparing a marriage bed, willing to cross any aristocrat daring to spoil his wedding bliss in *The Marriage of Figaro*. The answer to the Revolutionary times in which *The Magic Flute* and *Ariadne* were written is an ecumenical epiphany, a vision of a democracy of love and gender, loyalty and suffering, aspiration and bliss ushered in through glorious music.

In the end, what strikes me about *The Magic Flute* and *Ariadne*,—in addition to the beauty of the music—is the fact that every main character lovingly composed with utmost attention and care, whether they know it or not, suffers some kind of trauma that’s thwarting their growth, joy and well-being and which they must seek to surmount; and they need each other to do it. It is our suffering that brings us together. We are sisters and brothers in what we share. In pain and joy, we know our humanity. We know it, because we have had to learn it. We know that there is no help for us if we do not reach out our hand. And who knows?—someone may pass on to us a magic flute.