

Making Miniature Opera Sets for Die Zauberflote: Twelve Famous Scenes

There's an obvious advantage to creating opera sets in miniature that are not intended for full-scale realization. Such pretend scenes of settings that are make-believe to begin with extend a freedom from logistical problems, like getting sight-lines right, or trying to make a machine appear to fly. In making these scenes from *The Magic Flute*, the set designer was the libretto, and the director, of course, was the music. Listening, imagining and creating were sustained in the same absorption. The scenes sprang to mind when I first read the libretto, each with an immediate New York City counterpart. New York is a city of allegory, music and magic, and happens to be full of Masonic symbols, since the founding fathers were all Masons. Some ideas that emerged from my mental location-scouting are outlined below.

The first scene is *The Queen of the Night*. The “rocky place dotted with trees” ranging behind her temple is the **Palisades** along the Hudson River. Her “round temple” is the **Soldiers and Sailors Memorial**, looking remote and cold on Riverside Drive. The monument resembles the mountain out of which she appears in the desolate first scene. At night, the shadows of trees shift against somber masonry, to magnify the recalcitrance of the fortress. Baleful and hermetic, it is inaccessible, like the Queen, stressed by a rondelle of Corinthian columns that implies other Queen-of-the-Night traits—scintillate rage and energy. In Masonic symbolism, Corinthian columns stand for exuberance and action, qualities vocalized in the Queen's sparking arias.

Sarastro's Egyptian Room. The scene changes to a sumptuous Egyptian room – the **Temple of Dendur**, which is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Thick, ancient columns and massive walls are incised with hieroglyphs that depict “magic,” “flute,” and “singing men and women.”

The Temple of Wisdom has triple entrances and a Corinthian colonnade; so does the **New York Public Library**. In the miniature, each door is flanked by a pair of globes: red (“Stand Back!”) for the doors marked Reason and Nature, green for the door which opens to Wisdom. The spheres represent those outside subway entrances color-coded to indicate access to stations. Miniature Egyptian figures replace the Classical Roman statues on the Library pediment. This is Sarastro's realm; his attribute is the lion (leadership, nobility, prowess, loyalty); we first see him in a chariot drawn by six lions. Not everyone knows that the Library Lions have names – Patience and Fortitude – qualities emphasized in *The Magic Flute* as prerequisites for initiation.

The fourth scene, *A Palm Grove*, is the **Wintergarden** at the **World Financial Center**, with tall palms of gold fronds and silver trunks. The “thrones of fronds” are the curving green benches of the Wintergarden. The marble floor imitates the Wintergarden's white, gray and rose patterns, with additional borders of black-and-white tile for its Masonic symbolism.

In *Monostatos and Pamina*, the Moor threatens Pamina, who is asleep in a rose bower, in Central Park's **Conservatory Garden**. On the backdrop, a large moon (emblem of her mother, the Queen of the Night), hovers above an apt symbol of Monostatos, a dusky and priapic obelisk, miniature version of the one in **Central Park**.

The Flying Machine takes place beneath a miniature rendering of the **59th St. Bridge and is the Roosevelt Island Tram**. According to the libretto, it's laden with roses, punning with Roosevelt ("world of roses" in Dutch). Roses, masonic symbol of purity, are the province and vehicle of the three young spirit guides who are conveyed in the opera by means of a *deus ex machina* across the stage. The picnic table in the opera is laden with New York City fast food like pizza and Chinese take-out.

The Sound of the Flute beckons wild animals from the woods. This scene is set uptown in **Ft. Tryon Park**.

The Vault beneath the Pyramid is a lower **subway tunnel**, with glass pyramid lanterns.

The Cabinet of Reflection is in the basement of the **Metropolitan Museum**, where fantastic artifacts are stored.

The Trial by Fire and Water occurs beneath a grotto-like embankment of the **West Side Highway**.

Papageno's Nest. St. Paul's Chapel at Trinity Church was built in 1766, when Mozart was 10. George Washington, who worshipped there, also was a Mason; he stopped attending services in 1791, the year *The Magic Flute* was written. The chapel displays documents about 18th-century New York, among them a little sketch of **the first synagogue**, built in 1729. This rustic, fenced-in cottage seems a comely nest for the Papageno brood. Behind the panpipe fence posts, odd little birdhouses are set in trees with feathers instead of leaves.

The opera ends with *Sasrastras' Sun*. Filling the stage is an homage to the sunburst chandeliers at the **Metropolitan Opera House**. It was a gift of Austrian crystals to New York from Mozart's homeland, and has come to epitomize all opera.

(1998, New York City)