



SAN FRANCISCO  
OPERA EDUCATION

### ***The Magic Flute* Source Material**

Evidently Emmanuel Schikaneder's request for an opera from Mozart stemmed from a need for a work that would attract as large an audience as possible, that would be of high artistic merit but popular at the same time. He evidently ordered it in the form of a *singspiel*, a typically German form of opera that used spoken dialogue with sung numbers. This was a style of musical entertainment popular in the non-aristocratic theatres in German speaking countries that can be traced back to the first performance of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in German translation in the early 18th century. Since that time the *singspiel* had become quite popular as a form, and many of the libretti for these pieces came from the more fantastic strains of German literature.

Schikaneder derived the libretto for *The Magic Flute* from various sources but most significantly from a story, by Jakob August Liebeskind, called *Lulu, oder der Zauberflöte* (*Lulu, or the Magic Flute*). This story came from a collection of pseudo-oriental fairy tales published in 1786 under the title *Dschinnistan*. \*

But the most significant source, at least underneath the surface, seems to be the ritual and symbolism of the fraternal order of Freemasons, a group with which both Schikaneder and Mozart were associated. It should be noted that Schikaneder was not allowed to become a Freemason in his native Regensburg because his character did not fit their moral code of ethics (he was evidently something of a womanizer). It is rumored that he was a member of the lodge in Vienna that Mozart belonged to, but there is no evidence to support this claim.

Schikaneder also had cognizance of Phillip Hafner's play *Megara, the Terrible Witch*, dating from 1763. "Megara" contributed to some of the magical fairy tale elements so closely intertwined within the seriousness of *The Magic Flute*.

Ritualistic elements, including the ancient Egyptian setting can be traced to Jean Terrasson's novel, *Sethos*, dating from 1731. \*\*

*Source: operapaedia.org, geocities.com & The Cambridge guide to theatre* (By Martin Banham)

\* A brief outline of the tale *Lulu, oder Die Zauberflöte*:

A wicked magician, Dilsenhuin, has robbed the "radiant fairy" Perifirime of her daughter, Sidi, and carried off a magic talisman. The magician keeps the damsel in confinement and persecutes her with amatory advances which she is able to resist through a power which is to support her so long as her heart is untouched by love. Perifirime promises the hand of her daughter, whose father is the King of Cashmere, to Prince Lulu, son of the King of Chorassan, if he can regain the stolen talisman for her. To do this, however, is given only to one who has never felt the divine passion. Lulu undertakes the adventure, and as aids the fairy gives him a magic flute and a ring. The tone of the flute will win the hearts of all who hear it; by turning the

ring, the wearer is enabled to assume any form desired at will; by throwing it away he may summon the fairy herself to his aid. The Prince assumes the form of an old man, and, like Orpheus, softens the nature of the wild beasts that he meets in the forest. He even melts the heart of the magician himself, who admits him to his castle.

Once he is within its walls, the inmates all yield to the charm of his magical music, not excepting the lovely prisoner. At a banquet he throws the magician and his companions into a deep sleep, and possesses himself of the talisman. It is a gold fire-steel, every spark struck from which becomes a powerful spirit whose service is at the command of the possessor. With the help of genii, struck from the magical implement, and the fairy whom he summons at the last, Prince Lulu overcomes all the obstacles placed in his way. Discomfited, the magician flies away as an owl. Perifirime destroys the castle and carries the lovers in a cloud chariot to her own palace. Their royal fathers give their blessings, and Prince Lulu and Princess Sidi are joined in wedlock.

Source: [www.oldandsold.com](http://www.oldandsold.com)

\*\* More about *Sethos*

Sethos is the hero of an improbably influential fantasy novel, *Life of Sethos* (taken from *Private Memoirs of the Ancient Egyptians*), published in 1731 by the French Abbé Jean Terrasson. The book appeared in Paris in 1731 and in an English translation published in London by J. Walthoe in 1732.

According to the noted classicist Mary Lefkowitz, *Sethos* “purports to be a translation of an ancient manuscript found in the library of an unnamed foreign nation that is ‘extremely jealous of this sort of treasure.’ The author is said to have been an anonymous Greek in the second century A.D. Here Terrasson is following the conventions of ancient writers of historical fictions, such as the author of the *Hermetica*, who pretend that their works are translations of ancient writings that no one but themselves has seen. But Terrasson is careful not to deceive his readers completely: he assures them that the work he has ‘translated’ for them is a fiction.... He assures them that although fictional, the story keeps close to ancient sources, which, for the reader's convenience, he cites throughout the text. But he also says that ‘it is natural to suppose’ that his author had access to original sources (now lost), such as memoirs available in the sacred archives of Egypt, written by unknown priests who accompanied Sethos on his travels. The sophisticated reader would be amused by the notion that the anonymous author had consulted these otherwise unknown documents, but Terrasson gives no warning to less well-educated readers that there is in fact no reason to ‘suppose’ that these documents ever existed.”

This eighteenth century work of fiction is a primary source of Afrocentrism and of the kind of black history found in such popular books as Martin Bernal's *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, and George James' *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy Is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*.

It is also a key source of a popular web of conspiracy theories positing a secret pagan subculture of Freemasons, devotees of Satan, and environmentalists dedicated to the overthrow of Christianity.

Although at one time it was believed that *Sethos* was a source for Masonic rituals and ideas, it is now understood that Terrasson took the rituals of the Freemasons, already popular in the France of his day, and projected them backward into his imaginary Egyptian mystery cult.

*Source: wikipedia.com*