Overture to *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)*, K620

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

B. January 27, 1756 in Salzburg
D. December 5, 1791 in Vienna

First performed on September 30, 1791 at the Freihaustheater auf der Wieden and conducted by the composer.

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani and strings (approx. 6 minutes).

Mozart's overture to *Die Zauberflöte* was completed mere days before the opera's premiere. The deadline seems hardly to have flustered the composer. The succinct overture is a flourish of wit, energy and allusion. The opening declamatory chords of the work are rich with significance. In addition to introducing the tonal opposition of the opera between E-flat and C (the first chord is an E-flat major chord; the second, C minor), the three-chord statement returns both halfway through the overture and halfway through the opera where its repetition becomes associated with the trials that the hero, Tamino, must undergo to be united with Pamina. Even the grouping of the chords into three separate utterances is thought to be a reference to Masonic numerology, one of the many ways in which Mozart and his librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder, incorporated the symbols and themes of Freemasonry into *Die Zauberflöte*.

The spirited allegro that follows the dark introduction is less Masonic in its inspiration and more indebted to Muzio Clementi (1752–1832). Ten years earlier, Clementi and Mozart had faced off in a piano "duel" for Emperor Joseph II, but the contest, which had included Clementi performing his sonata Op. 24 No. 2, had ended in a tie. Although Mozart believed Clementi to possess "not a kreuzer's worth of taste or feeling," the rivalry did not prevent him from using the opening thematic material of Clementi's sonata as the melodic crux of the overture's allegro section. Clementi was understandably outraged by this melodic pilferage, but he was perhaps bothered more by Mozart's deft reworking of his musical ideas. Clementi's sonata is a droll and jaunty concoction in its own right, but Mozart's fugal treatment of the theme and his clever use of dynamic contrast inject additional drive, focus, and urgency, making it one of Mozart's most memorable operatic openings.

The DSO last performed Mozart's Overture to *Die Zauberflöte* on April 25-27, 2000, with Alistair Willis conducting.

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Program note by Nathan Platte, doctoral candidate in musicology at the University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre & Dance.

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