EMANUEL SCHIKANEDER:
THE LIBRETTIST OF 'DIE ZAUBERFLÖTE'

By E. M. Batley

"Die Strahlen der Sonne vertreiben die Nacht, Zernichten der Heuchler erschlichene Macht". ('Die Zauberflöte')

The following extract is taken from Miss Brigid Brophy's recent publication 'Mozart the Dramatist' and appears as a footnote on the opening page of her chapter "Die Zauberflöte" solved:

Schikaneder's authorship, asserted by the original playbill, was afterwards challenged. (See Einstein: Mozart . . . , 23; E. J. Dent: Mozart's Operas, 14.) Die Zauberflöte's is just the type of libretto that is most certainly the result of collaboration: I shall avoid controversy by referring to its authors in the plural.

The problems surrounding the opera are several. Miss Brophy refers to some of them, but the vital question of authorship, which has to besettled before her analysis of the libretto becomes at all valid, is deemed worthy of a mere, ill-informed footnote. Thus Miss Brophy perpetuates a tradition of misconception begun in 1856 by Mozart's biographer, Otto Jahn, and continued by E. J. Dent in 1911 and 1913 with the publication of 'Mozart's Opera, the Magic Flute' and 'Mozart's Operas: a Critical Study'. This, of course, is not unexpected in a book whose bibliography fails to include the names of Egon Komorzynski, Schikaneder's only biographer, and Otto Rommel, the literary historian of the Old Viennese Popular Theatre. The latter's work was published as recently as 1952, while the latest edition of Schikaneder's biography appeared in the previous year. Each of these authorities has shown, beyond all reasonable doubt, that Schikaneder was the sole librettist of 'Die Zauberflöte'. While the evidence offered by Komorzynski and Rommel cannot be regarded as final, it indicated a direction which recent Mozart research has had to follow in the quest for truth. Karl Ludwig Giesecke, the man on whose shoulders posterity has sought to place some responsibility for the libretto, has already been revealed by Rommel as an artist totally unfitted for the creation of a text such as that of 'Die Zauberflöte'. The same man's activities, however, add even greater weight to Rommel's argument.

1 p. 131.
2 'Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart', 4 vols. (Leipzig, 1856).
3 'Mozart's Opera, the Magic Flute' (Cambridge, 1911); 'Mozart's Operas' (London, 1913).
4 'Die Alt-Wiener Volkskomödie' (Vienna, 1952).
5 'Emanuel Schikaneder' (Wiesbaden & Vienna, 1951).
In Schikaneder's 'Freihaustheater' Giesecke was nothing more than a second-rate actor and arranger. His true métier was academic rather than theatrical and resulted in his eventual appointment as Professor of Mineralogy at Dublin University. Giesecke's works for the stage lacked originality and consisted in the main of travesties and adaptations. On the other hand, plagiarism in Vienna of the late eighteenth century could not be fairly judged a literary crime, as the whole tradition of the theatre, from its establishment in 1712 by Stranitzky to its demise with the death of Nestroy, thrived on the subversion of popular and original material for theatrical ends. Whether such appropriation was a subconscious act, or one of deliberate reference, is a question which cannot be answered satisfactorily. Giesecke, however, exceeded even these lax limits of theatrical morality when he wrote the libretto to Wranitzky's 'Oberon, König der Elfen', the work enjoying a successful première in Schikaneder's theatre on 7 November 1789. In addition to other close textual affinities 12 of its 26 arias were verbatim copies of arias in Sophie Seyler's 'Oberon oder König der Elfen', which was first performed as early as July 1788, before Schikaneder had arrived in Vienna to assume management of the 'Freihaustheater'. With the right intentions, but with the wrong results, Giesecke's roguery has been manipulated to discredit him absolutely, while Schikaneder has had an honesty and warm-heartedness thrust upon him which could never allow such blatant deception. Castelli's memoirs and Perinet's activities as a poet and critic uphold the truth of this picture of Schikaneder, but the 'Oberon' episode is of greater musicological import. While refusing to acknowledge any indebtedness to Sophie Seyler, Giesecke did, on the other hand, mention Wieland as his source. As Sophie Seyler had already acknowledged Wieland, and as Giesecke's 'Oberon' differed only slightly from its predecessor of 1788, the latter's reference to Wieland cannot prove that he was acquainted with the original. Rather does the episode suggest that Sophie Seyler knew Wieland's 'Oberon' and that Giesecke did not. What can certainly be accepted without question is that Giesecke knew of Wieland, either via Sophie Seyler or from his own reading.

7 Ibid.
8 Joseph Anton Stranitzky (1676–1727) was the first Viennese Hans Wurst and the man responsible for establishing the Old Viennese Popular Theatre in the 'Comödienhaus am Plätze nächst dem Kärntnerthor' in 1712.
10 Rommel, op. cit., p. 985. Both versions of this opera are available in the Theater-sammlung of the Austrian National Library in Vienna.
11 Komorzyński, pp. 70–81.
13 'Mozart und Schikaneder. Ein theatralisches Gespräch über die Aufführung der Zauberflöte im Stadttheater', Gedruckt mit Albertischen Schriften (Vienna, 1801); 'Theatralisches Gespräch zwischen Mozart und Schikaneder über den Verkauf des Theaters' (Vienna, 1802).
14 Wiener Theater-Almanach (Vienna, 1803), pp. 66 foll.: 'Neu'erbautes'; p. 134: 'Impromptue'.

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The success of Giesecke's 'Oberon, König der Elfen' in 1789, at a time when it was imperative that Schikaneder should establish a new, and paying repertory, is not likely to have gone unheeded by the enterprising impresario. It would have been unusual neglect on his part, if he had failed to note Wieland as the original inspiration. Nevertheless, despite scenic and textual affinities, it cannot be accepted that Wieland's 'Dschinnistan' was the outstanding influence on the construction of 'Die Zauberflöte', as other contemporary literature is completely justified in its similar claims. But whether or not Schikaneder availed himself of his knowledge of Wieland in writing the libretto of 'Die Zauberflöte', it is at least certain that he was acquainted with 'Dschinnistan'. Komorzynski believes the latter work to be the inspiration for Schikaneder's later Zauberopern: 'Der Stein der Weisen oder: Die Zauberinsel', 'Der wohl'tätige Derwisch' and 'Der Spiegel von Arkadien', while Bauer supports his view that part two of 'Die Zauberflöte': 'Das Labyrinth oder: der Kampf mit den Elementen' is from the same source. Schikaneder acknowledged his indebtedness to Wieland when in his last will and testament he left him 300 Gulden "als Verfasser des Dschinnistans'.

The belief that Giesecke was one of the librettists of 'Die Zauberflöte' has arisen from the publication in 1849 of an article in 'Die Oper in Deutschland' by Julius Cornet. In it Cornet describes a meeting between himself, Giesecke and others, in such a way as to encourage the notion that Giesecke shared in the creation of the opera. The following remark precedes the description of the meeting, but voices assumptions which are obviously based on that incident:

Und vor allen die ächt deutsche 'Zauberflöte' von Schikaneder und seinem Choristen Giesecke, der ihm den Plan der Handlung, Scenen =Eindeutung und die bekannten naiven Reime machte.

There is no contemporary evidence available which can support these assertions. They were made known 58 years after the opera's successful première in 1791 and depended for their existence on a meeting which had taken place 31 years previously. In the first place Cornet's reliability has been questioned, while the three divisions of the above statement reveal ignorance of Schikaneder's creative abilities. It is virtually incredible that Giesecke, who was noted for his lack of originality, could have been in any way responsible for the construction of a plot as rich as that of 'Die Zauberflöte', unless that plot had been taken directly from Wieland or Sophie Seyler. It is equally erroneous to believe that Giesecke could suggest

14 Ibid., p. 272.
17 Komorzynski, p. 333.
18 'Die Oper in Deutschland' (Hamburg, 1849).
19 Ibid., pp. 22 foll.
20 Rommel, pp. 981–3: 'Ist Cornets Bericht glaubwürdig?'.

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the *Scenen-Eintheilung* to a man, who, as a result of unusually wide theatrical experience, was extremely knowledgeable as a producer, and in whose works, whatever their literary worth, both before and after ‘Die Zauberflöte’, his genius as a man of the theatre is abundantly evident.⁴² It is also unlikely that Schikaneder’s imagination would require assistance from Giesecke in the fabrication of rhyme.

The alleged meeting between Cornet and Giesecke occurred in the summer of 1818 in the presence of Ignaz von Seyfried, Korntheuer, Julius Laroche, Küstner and Gned:⁴⁴


There is no further evidence to support these claims. Ignaz von Seyfried, who according to Cornet had suspected that Schikaneder was not the sole librettist of ‘Die Zauberflöte’, was the only other witness alive in 1849. In 1791, the year in which the opera received its first performance, Seyfried was only 15 years old, as Rommel has indicated.⁴⁶ As one who was initiated by Schikaneder in the ways of theatrical musicianship, and who was subsequently familiar with the impresario’s *modus operandi*, Seyfried never refers to these, what must have been startling, assertions by Cornet, although he was supposedly present at the meeting in 1818. On the contrary Seyfried testifies to the fact that Schikaneder was a prolific writer, who had little need of assistance:

Schikaneder sei zwar ohne literarische Bildung, habe aber über eine natürliche Begabung und eine ungemein fruchtbare Phantasie verfügt.⁴⁸

In his memoirs Castelli expresses a similar respect for Schikaneder’s capacity for creative work, when he scotchês a rumour that Schikaneder had sought assistance from a priest by the name of Wüst. It is the lack of that ability in Wüst which induces Castelli to discount the rumour.⁴⁹ Joachim Perinet, who as a playwright in Marinelli’s ‘Leopoldstadttheater’ had been one of Schikaneder’s keenest rivals, eventually served him as writer and actor in the

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²² This was acknowledged by Goethe (Komorzynski, p. 350).
²³ ‘Die Oper in Deutschland’, pp. 22 foll.
²⁴ Ibid.
²⁷ A. Schmidt, ‘Denksteine’ (Vienna, 1848), pp. 5 foll.
²⁸ Rommel, p. 981.

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‘Freihaustheater’ and ‘Theater an der Wien’ from 1798 to 1803.  

As editor of the Theatralmanach of 1803 Perinet contradicts further rumours which were circulating about Schikaneder. It is not impossible that Castelli and Perinet were referring to the same source:

Hier ist auch ein Gerede zu widerlegen, das sich fast allgemein fälschlich verbreitete, als wäre Schikaneder nicht Vater und eigener Fabrizierer seiner theatralischen Kinder. Es ist erwiesen, dass Plan und Dialogisierung sein Eigen ist, und Herr Winter, der zugleich Inspizient dieses Theaters ist, wird es attestieren, denn nur er und vielleicht er allein kann Schikaneders Hieroglyphen lesen, die er immer zuerst zu kopieren bekommt.

Perhaps as a result of Castelli’s and Perinet’s interference the rumours died. Nevertheless, that such thoughts should have been in people’s minds, requires some further elucidation, as far as this is possible. Around the turn of the century it was known in Vienna that there existed a strong feeling of enmity between Schikaneder, the successful manager of a ‘Vorstadtttheater’, and Freiherr von Braun, the envious impresario of the not so successful ‘Hof und Nationaltheater’, which had been established in Vienna in 1776. When Schikaneder moved into his new theatre, the ‘Theater an der Wien’ in 1801, ‘Thespis’, the Gelegenheitsstück with which he closed the ‘Freihaustheater’, made it quite clear that evil rumours preceded him there. Braun had done his utmost to discredit Schikaneder in the eyes of the Viennese public, and even after the Imperial Court had granted Schikaneder permission to build his new theatre, he had sought to have the agreement withdrawn. Schikaneder makes a public reference to Braun’s intrigues in ‘Thespis Traum’, a curtain-raiser on the first night of the ‘Theater an der Wien’, although he avoids mentioning his enemy by name. Rumours of this kind were doubtless encouraged by Braun in the first place, when he gave a wretched performance of ‘Die Zauberflöte’ in the Stadttheater and refused to acknowledge Schikaneder on the play-bill.

Under these circumstances it is not altogether surprising that Schikaneder has since been constantly maligned. Otto Jahn, in his biography, thus took up Cornet’s message and it gathered momentum of its own accord. However, the truth of Cornet’s report becomes apparent with the realization that, although Seyfried did not give any material support to Cornet’s observations, he did maintain that Giesecke was the man who turned Schikaneder’s attention to

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20 Rommel, pp. 546–50.
21 Wiener Theatralmanach (1803), pp. 66 foll.: ‘Neuerbautes’.
22 In the Theatersammlung of the Austrian National Library.
24 See n. 32.
26 Komorzynski, pp. 265 foll.; Perinet, ‘Mozart und Schikaneder’ (see n. 13).
Wieland's 'Dschinnistan.' In his will Schikaneder acknowledged Wieland, but throughout his life-time made no reference to Giesecke. It is in this light that Giesecke can be regarded as 'den eigentlichen Verfasser der 'Zauberflöte', that is, he was the real author in that he suggested the source to Schikaneder. It follows from this that Giesecke's supplementary assertion that only the figures of Papageno and Papagena were due to Schikaneder's invention may be true, once it has been ascertained that Schikaneder actually made use of Wieland, as these are two popular figures superimposed on a traditional plot. But before Wieland's influence on the libretto of 'Die Zauberflöte' is over-estimated, it is important to note the frequency with which plots of similar arrangement and construction occurred, some of them appearing before 1780, the year in which Wieland's 'Oberon' first appeared. Schikaneder was well acquainted with all of the following: Hafner's 'Megära, die fürchterliche Hexe', Schiebeler's 'Lisuart und Dariolette', Gebler's 'Thamos, König in Ägypten', Mozart's 'Entführung aus dem Serail', Hensler's 'Handeln macht der Mann oder: der Freimaurer', 'Kasper der Fagottist' and 'Das Sonnenfest der Brahminen'. Wieland acknowledges Chaucer as one of the sources for his 'Oberon' and Schiebeler marks a similar indebtedness to the English writer on the title-page of 'Lisuart und Dariolette'. The libretto of 'Die Zauberflöte' must consequently be regarded as the product of a tradition, which originated in the Alt-Wiener Volks-theater, and in which Schikaneder figured prominently and Giesecke hardly at all, the same tradition offering additional proof that Schikaneder was the opera's only librettist.

37 Rommel, p. 990: 'Ergebnis', 3.c.
38 This most famous Zauberposse by Hafner was established in the repertory of the Old Viennese Popular Theatre by 1763 and continued to exert an influence on the later 'Kasperltheater', which was contemporary with Schikaneder.
39 The music to this Singspiel was written by Johann Adam Hiller. It was performed by the Old Viennese Popular Theatre in 1767 and from Vienna passed to the German Wanderbühne, where Schikaneder became acquainted with it, playing the part of the hero, Lisuart (Komorzynski, pp. 38 foll.).
40 During his years on the German Wanderbühne Schikaneder became well acquainted with Gebler's dramas. Hermann Endröts maintains that 'Thamos' was performed by Schikaneder's company in Salzburg in 1780 in the 'Impressariotheater beim Mirabellgarten' (Augsburger Mozarthuch, Bd. 55 & 56 [1942–3], p. 218).
41 The ultimate forgiveness of Belmont and Constanze has been accredited to Schikaneder's influence (Schenk, 'Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart' [Zürich, Leipzig & Vienna, 1955], p. 754).
42 Rommel, pp. 500 foll.
43 This Zauberoper was first performed on 8 June 1791, three months before the première of 'Die Zauberflöte'. Mozart went to see it in the 'Kasperltheater' and on 12 June wrote to his wife that he was not at all impressed.
45 'Oberon': 'An den Leser'.
46 See n. 32.