



Courtesy Kaye Terry Hanson

The author's grandchildren listen while she tells them the story of *The Magic Flute*. The author recounted the opera's story to her grandchildren for the first time during a family vacation to the beach. As the music and the author's narration ended, the children clamored for her to tell the story again.

## A Magic Summer with *The Magic Flute*

*Kaye Terry Hanson*

**M**y granddaughter, Sadie, is nearly four. She and I drive to California in my car to spend a week in a rented house at the beach with extended family. Her parents and two brothers follow in another car. With Sadie buckled in her car seat behind me, I look for ways to entertain her as I drive. “Want to hear a story about a princess?” I ask. Of course she does. I slip my newly purchased CD of *The Magic Flute* into the car stereo system and begin. “A prince wanders into an unknown land where a scary monster snake lives. When the prince sees the snake, he is so scared that he faints. Three mysterious women kill the snake and tell their queen about the handsome prince.” I look in the rear-view mirror and see that Sadie is hooked. “Then what happens?” she asks.

“A funny man named Papageno, dressed all in feathers, finds the prince just as he wakes up. The prince sees the dead snake and asks who killed it, and Papageno lies and says that he did. The three mysterious women hear Papageno lie about the snake and punish him by putting a lock on his mouth.” I look at Sadie in the mirror. “Listen, Sadie, here’s how Papageno sings with a lock on his mouth.” I punch the CD forward, and Papageno hums, “Hm, hm, hm, hm. . . .” Sadie laughs out loud and begs me to play that part over and over again. I do, and I wonder at the understanding of a little girl. I would never have known a story about an opera when I was a child.



In our small southern Utah town, opera was laughed at. Never mind that our pioneer ancestors had built a fine structure named The Opera

House. Never mind that every Christmas the Beaver Second Ward presented a full-voiced, full-blown, and probably perfectly respectable production of Handel's *Messiah*. Never mind that most of us took piano lessons and learned our quota of piano pieces written by Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. Opera was silly. Everybody knew that. It was weird, long, and most of all, too hard to understand. So we didn't understand it. We made fun of it, and none of us knew anybody who didn't.

How is it that such a beginning could lead to my learning to enjoy opera today—often listening to it as the music of choice on a long car trip—or to my teaching and sharing opera stories with my grandchildren?



In Las Vegas, Sadie climbs into her parents' car, and her brother Zachary buckles in behind me. Encouraged by Sadie's interest in *The Magic Flute* story, I also tell it to Zachie, who is six. Zachie has a natural affinity for music—he always has—and he responds delightedly to the vocal gymnastics of the dark queen.



Two periods in my life were important in my learning about opera. Following my freshman year at Brigham Young University, I returned to my old job as a summer lifeguard at the Beaver Municipal Pool. The new manager had just finished his first year as the music teacher at the high school. He loved music, of course, and had an elaborate (for those days) stereophonic record player with gigantic speakers and a wonderful collection of classical long-playing records—including opera scores—that he willingly shared. As we listened, he would say, "Notice how the violins sound like they're weeping" or "Hear the triumph in the trumpets here?" or "This passage means that the lovers are parting."

I was receiving an intense course in music appreciation. And, miracle of miracles, I began to love the music because I understood. By the time I graduated from the university, I had begun to understand some other things about the performing arts. I had discovered the theater department, developed an ear and a heart for Shakespeare, and learned that several of my friends at school had arrived there loving classical music, classical theater, and—to my surprise—opera! Why, I wondered, didn't they grow up thinking opera was laughable?



On our last leg of the journey, McKay, who is barely twenty-two months old, is buckled in behind me. Conversation about *The Magic Flute*

is limited, especially on his side, but I play the music anyway and talk to him about good and bad and light and dark and happy and sad. I have no idea what he understands, but he “dances” happily to the music and responds to my smiles and questions of “Do you like it?” with toothy grins of his own.



The second important period in my “learning about opera” life began the summer following my graduation from BYU. I was called on a mission to southern Germany, surely one of the most beautiful places on earth for the eye and the ear. In the midst of the quaint, unsophisticated cobblestone streets and feather beds airing from upper-story windows, I was amazed to discover that each German town with more than about fifty thousand inhabitants supported a professional symphony, a professional theater, a professional ballet company, and, often, a professional opera company. Such government support and community attendance was unheard of where I came from. In time, behind the doors we knocked on, we met and talked with members of those professional companies in several cities. We shared our love for the gospel of Jesus Christ with them, and they shared their love for fine music and theater with us.

And the classical music in Germany was not limited to professional performers. I was surprised to find a Mozart hymn in our Sunday *Gesangbuch* entitled “Noch warten, Herr, in deinem Reich.” I was even more surprised to find the same hymn in our English hymnal with the title “Though in the Outward Church Below.” It was years before I discovered that the music is from *The Magic Flute*.

In those days, our mission president encouraged us on “Diversion Days” to lose ourselves in things German, so several times we chose operas, plays, or ballets to enrich our mastery of the German language and our understanding of German culture. Our whole district, at the insistence of a young music-major elder, once attended Weber’s *Der Freischutz* and learned that there was a difference between German opera and Italian opera. *How did that young elder come by his knowledge of opera so early?* I wondered. Eventually it dawned on me that children learn what they’re exposed to.



We arrive at the beach and settle in for our week of sun, sand, and sea. Two other grandchildren, Olle, who is four, and Leif, who is two, arrive. Encouraged by Zachie’s and Sadie’s reactions when I had them captive in

my car, I catch Olle and Leif up on the story and continue. “Sarastro, the king, tells the prince and Papageno that they will have to withstand three trials to prove they are worthy of the princess. Their first trial is one of silence. Papageno struggles with it; it’s too hard to be quiet.” The cousins look at one another. They know how hard it is to be quiet.

Still, these children are veterans of *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, and *Spy Kids*. They know about heroes, and they are not surprised when I tell them that Tamino keeps silent. All five children huddle by me on the beach house couch. The music plays from the CD player as we finish the story together. “As the prince plays on his magic flute, he and Pamina walk bravely through the fire and the water together. They have passed all the tests. The end.” The children sit still for a moment then clamor, “Tell it again, tell it again!” So I do.

Then I realize that the children’s parents, my own grown children and their spouses, are lingering in the background to hear the storytelling, too. I hear the fathers whistling arias from Mozart’s music, and I hear the mothers humming along.



I remember three ways my children became acquainted with fine music. First, since I had learned that children don’t make fun of things they are familiar with, I played classical music for my babies to hear. Second, when we went through a time of great personal sadness and heartache together, I read in the scriptures that David played music to soothe the troubled Saul. I experienced that same soothing. Third, when it came time for music lessons for my daughter, she expressed an interest in violin. I signed her up for the Suzuki method, complete with tapes that played as she went to sleep. Those tapes blessed all our lives. In short, both of my children responded to, embraced, and enjoyed classical music. They still do.



We play *The Magic Flute* all week at the beach. Periodically, I repeat something similar to what my music-teacher friend used to say to me: “Here is where the Three Ladies slay the monster snake” or “Listen to how the prince falls in love with the picture of the princess” or “Hear how angry the Queen of the Night is when she finds out that her plan to destroy Sarastro, the King of Light, won’t work.”



Our week at the beach is long ended. I have since heard that parents in Vienna take their children to *The Magic Flute* to introduce them to opera the way we take our children to *The Nutcracker* to introduce them to ballet, and I look for a nearby production to share with my grandchildren. At the library, I find an out-of-print children's book of the opera. When we're together, the children often ask for the story again. Sometimes when we read bedtime stories together, they choose this one, and sometimes when we talk about right and wrong or dark and light, I remind them of the magic kingdom where a prince proved his worth by passing hard tests. As they grow, I will explain other elements of the opera in more depth, but for now, it is enough to remember the magic summer when we all shared *The Magic Flute*.

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