



© 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 1. *The Magic Flute, Main Poster*, by Marc Chagall, 1966, created for the Metropolitan Opera. The images in this poster represent not only characters from Mozart's opera but also characters from the Garden of Eden.

An Allegory of Eden

Marc Chagall's *Magic Flute* Poster

Philipp B. Malzl

“For me there is nothing on earth that approaches those two perfections, *The Magic Flute* and the Bible.”¹

—Marc Chagall

In 1964, the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City commissioned Marc Chagall to design the stage sets and costumes for its first production of Mozart's acclaimed opera *The Magic Flute*, scheduled for 1967. In three years, Chagall created 13 large curtains, 26 smaller curtains, and 121 costumes and masks.

In addition, the Metropolitan Opera asked the artist to produce two monumental murals entitled *The Sources of Music* (1966) and *The Triumph of Music* (1966), which pay tribute to the world's great opera composers and which were permanently installed in the foyer of the new Lincoln Center opera house. Although these images were not intended as part of the 1967 production of *The Magic Flute* per se, one of them, *The Sources of Music*, does contain overt references to Mozart. One group of figures in *The Sources of Music* reappears almost unchanged in the poster Chagall made in 1966 to serve as an advertisement for the Met's production of *The Magic Flute*. This composition, entitled *The Magic Flute, Main Poster* (fig. 1), depicts a small group of animal characters that correspond to the main figures from the narrative of Mozart's opera. Compared to the art historical importance of the stage designs and the Lincoln center murals, the poster is probably the least significant.

Nonetheless, the *Magic Flute* poster deserves attention for a specific reason: it bears a strong resemblance to Chagall's numerous Garden of Eden scenes. The Garden of Eden is a theme the artist treats at various

stages of his artistic career, most frequently in the decade preceding this poster. The similarity of the poster with Chagall's edenic themes does not appear to be a phenomenon of chance. Instead, everything points to a deliberate attempt by Chagall to draw parallels between *The Magic Flute* and the Bible, since he felt that both works shared fundamental principles of goodness and truth. Indeed, each of the figures on the poster can be identified as a character from the opera while simultaneously corresponding to a character from the Garden of Eden. Thus, Chagall pays homage to two major sources of personal and artistic inspiration whose messages he thought to be harmonious.

Characters from the Opera in the Poster

Before demonstrating the dual symbolism of the creatures on the poster, I must first establish their identity in the opera. The *Magic Flute* poster is inhabited by five distinct figures. Two felines occupy the base of the composition. In the dense foliage of green trees and bushes above them lurks a large snake. To its right, a mysterious flute-playing winged figure hovers seemingly weightlessly in space. Immediately above this winged figure, a bird with an abstracted, triangular tail feather forms the apex of the composition. These characters are all enveloped in a lush and colorful vegetative environment, presumably a forest, indicated by two trees and shrubbery surrounding the characters.

At first glance, this scene appears to depict simply a group of animals enjoying the music coming from a flute. One is reminded of act 1, scene 3, of *The Magic Flute*, when Tamino plays his enchanted flute, whose magical sounds lure the forest animals out to dance; however, a comparison with Chagall's sketches and designs for the stage backdrops and curtains renders this interpretation problematic. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that these creatures actually represent four key figures from Mozart's opera symbolically disguised as animals. The winged figure stands for the Queen of the Night, while the snake represents the serpentlike creature chasing Tamino in the first scene of the opera. The pair of lions is meant to symbolize Tamino and Pamina, and, finally, Sarastro is embodied in the white bird above.

The Woman/Bird. In terms of composition, the flute-playing figure is most prominent. Again, although the flute player could be Tamino, more evidence speaks in favor of the flute player as the Queen of the Night. This attribution of identity is supported by four specific clues. First, the flute she is playing was delivered to Tamino by her design. Second, and more importantly, this figure is a hybrid: part human, part bird. And although Tamino

is not directly associated with birds in any way, the Queen is an enthusiastic bird collector and employer of a professional bird catcher named Papageno. The bird may thus be interpreted as one of her symbols.

A comparison with other depictions from Chagall's opera designs reveals a pattern that supports the association of the Queen with birds. For instance, the artist's design on the curtain for act 2, scene 10, depicts a crowned female figure inside a large bird, embedded in the dark blanket of night, suggested by the moon and stars on a blue background (fig. 2). Similarly, the curtain for the finale shows a female head and torso combined with a bird. Significantly, this time the woman is holding a flute. In addition, the face and talons of the part-bird figures in the poster and in the finale curtain are virtually identical.

Color is the final indicator of the half-bird's symbolic identity in the poster. Chagall has always utilized color to express ideas and emotions. Speaking about the ideology of his art in general, Chagall argued, "The style has no importance. The thing is to express oneself. Painting should have a psychical content. . . . I attenuate the white, *I muddy the blue by countless thoughts*. The psyche should get into the paint" (italics added).²

In other words, Chagall did not use color without considering its connotations. Supported by the artist's statement, it can be argued that his choice of blue, which surrounds both the Queen and the snake in the poster, might symbolically emphasize her role as ruler of the night. On a secondary level, blue may even represent the lies proceeding from her flute in the form of mesmerizing music, deceiving those within her reach. Contrast, for instance, the dominant use of blue in figure 2 with the vivid red in the curtain for the finale (fig. 3): by the end of the opera, a powerful red, perhaps Chagall's visual signifier for "Good," has conquered and replaced the Queen's "Evil." Furthermore, the Queen's hypocrisy is highlighted by a shimmering, semicircular halo as well as by her meek and innocent-looking face. By comparison, in the curtain for act 2, scene 10, the Queen is also wearing a crown. These details identify the hybrid in the poster as the Queen of the Night.

The Snake. The snake in the poster can be identified as a representation of the serpentine creature mentioned in the opera libretto. Its depiction in the *Magic Flute* poster is solely based on its brief appearance at the beginning of the opera when it pursues Tamino, only to be subdued by the Three Ladies.

The Lions. The other key characters in the *Magic Flute* poster are two feline creatures that resemble a pair of lions. The one on the right probably represents Tamino, while the one on the left stands for Pamina. This theory is supported by gender-specific features of the animals. For instance, the lion on the right has a mane, which is exclusive to male lions,



© 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 2. Detail of *The Magic Flute: Curtain for Act II, Scene 10*, by Marc Chagall. The crowned female figure inside the bird shows an association between the Queen of the Night and bird imagery.



© 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

Fig. 3. Detail of *The Magic Flute: The Curtain for Finale*, by Marc Chagall.

while the lion on the left has feminine facial features that are stressed by makeup-like accents, particularly on the lips. It is also noteworthy that Chagall depicted the lioness's feet like the Queen's, thus linking her physiologically to her mother.

It seems as though Chagall tries to illustrate an amorous relationship between the pair of lions. First, the lions seem playful, as if they were courting. Second, a yellow area unites the two creatures in a world of their own, which is only partially invaded by the Queen's color, blue. In the opera, Tamino was deceived by the Queen for some time. For this reason, Chagall may have tainted his body with blue.

But why would Chagall have chosen to disguise Pamina and Tamino as lions? This choice may be partially explained by referring to Freemason symbolism, a frequently employed interpretive source for scholars dealing with *The Magic Flute* opera. In *Ancient Craft Masonry*, the lion represents Christ, the "lion of the tribe of Judah."³

In addition, a consideration of the lion's secular iconography yields insight. In various cultures, lions are thought to be royal and noble creatures chosen to rule over all other animals. Similarly, Prince Tamino and Princess Pamina are rulers in their own right. But beyond their simple hereditary royalty, Chagall must have considered the individual noble character traits of Tamino and Pamina. For instance, in his analysis of the *Magic Flute* libretto, Robert Moberly expresses commonly held notions about Pamina's noble character. Besides the "exceptional Strength and Beauty of her womanly Nature,"⁴ he praises the princess for being "brave and unselfishly loyal, virtuous . . . truthful, [and] . . . incorruptible."⁵ Similarly, Tamino is described as having his heart in the right place. Although he is naive and timid, Moberly observes, the prince is "trying to be brave" and is "earnestly anxious to become a wise ruler."⁶ It is clear that theirs are truly noble attributes, thus validating Chagall's symbolic association of Tamino and Pamina with lions on two related levels: similarity to Christ and secular nobility.

Within the context of *The Magic Flute*, this symbolic association linking lions with Tamino and Pamina continues with Sarastro, the wise king. For instance, Papageno, mistakenly fearing Sarastro to be a bird-eating carnivore, calls him a *Tiger Tier* (tiger-animal; 1.8). Moreover, when Sarastro first appears, he does so in command of a majestic, lion-drawn chariot (1.8). A sketch for the opera performance illustrates how Chagall envisioned this scene (fig. 4). Although neither of the lions pulling the chariot is meant to embody Sarastro physically, it is likely that Chagall forged a symbolic link between Sarastro—the thematic source of goodness, truth, and light—and those who would eventually partake of these virtues within



Fig. 4. *Magic Flute: Sketch of Chariot Pulled by Lions*, by Marc Chagall. This is a sketch for the performance of act 1, scene 8. Sarastro first appears in the opera in a chariot pulled by two lions. Here Chagall may be linking the Christlike Sarastro with the Masonic epithet for Christ: “lion of the tribe of Judah.”

Sarastro’s temple. By depicting Tamino and Pamina as lions, Chagall alludes to their symbolic identity as Sarastro’s ideological offspring.

The White Bird. The final creature in the poster that represents a character from the opera is the white bird. It is true that birds, as well as hybrids between birds and humans, have long been a standard icon of Chagall’s paintings and etchings, so much so that at times their depiction appears random and insignificant. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that Chagall would have placed this particular bird arbitrarily, especially considering the symbolism of the other characters in the poster. Although birds have earlier been interpreted as a symbol of the Queen of the Night, several hints suggest that this particular bird personifies Sarastro. First, he is really the fourth essential opera figure to be accounted for. If the bird does, in fact, represent Sarastro, Chagall is obviously playing on the dichotomy that divides his ideological sphere from that of the wicked Queen. While Sarastro is depicted in the color of wisdom, light, and life, the Queen is surrounded by colors that stand for ignorance, darkness, and death. The bird’s place at the apex of the composition could symbolize Sarastro in that he is the only figure in the opera never to be blinded by the Queen’s lies, thus rising above all others. Finally, because the bird is white, it might actually be a dove, which strongly suggests a connotation of peace in Judeo-Christian

iconography. Again, this proponent of peace provides an appropriate antithesis to the Queen, who is the author of contention in *The Magic Flute*.

Although everything thus far follows logically, the meaning of the red triangle to the left of the bird is a bit more problematic. Perhaps the triangle is designed to serve simply as an abstracted, colorful tail feather for the bird. At the same time, this shape may constitute another generalized reference to Freemasonry, since the equilateral triangle is one of the most meaningful and common symbols of the fraternity.⁷

The fact that the artist was well informed about the countless references to Masonry in the opera is well documented. Emily Genauer, the primary scholar on Chagall's designs for *The Magic Flute* production, relates how Chagall studied as much as possible about Mozart and the libretto, "as well as analyses of it."⁸ Chagall became disenchanted with the overwhelming variety of interpretations, each imposing further manifestations of Masonry onto every element and character of *The Magic Flute*. Genauer observes that, although the painter did not "minimize the importance of Freemasonry to both Schikaneder [Freemason librettist of *The Magic Flute*] and Mozart, . . . Chagall was not concerned either with the references to or even the rituals of Freemasonry, which are scattered throughout the libretto."⁹

Although he refrains from rejecting Freemason interpretations altogether, Chagall makes it clear that he feels uncomfortable with reductive interpretations of the opera: "There are many levels of meaning [in the opera]. Who shall say that one or the other is right or the only one?"¹⁰ While he respects scholarly interpretations, Chagall reserves his artistic right to extract personalized meaning from the opera, based on his unique observations and experiences. Thus, the red triangle might be read as a superficial reference to Masonry while simultaneously acting as an aesthetically pleasing, abstracted part of the bird's anatomy.

Characters from the Garden of Eden in the Poster

Having identified each of the figures in the poster, we are now prepared to consider another key aspect of this image: Chagall believed that *The Magic Flute* had layers of meaning. In fact, Chagall capitalized on this multiplicity of meaning and extracted from the opera an additional interpretation, a biblical allegory. He provided hints of his vision not only in the sketches and designs for the opera, but most overtly within the poster.

Biblical Influences in Chagall's Earlier Work. The *Magic Flute* poster bears easily recognized similarities to Garden of Eden scenes Chagall created both before and after the poster. The Old Testament had always struck

a chord with Chagall, who was Jewish. Recalling his upbringing with the Bible, Chagall used these tender words: “Since my childhood, [the Bible] has filled me with vision about the fate of the world and inspired me in my work. . . . For me it is like a second nature.”¹¹

When he began the *Magic Flute* project in 1964, Chagall was emerging from a sixteen-year period during which he continuously worked almost exclusively on multiple biblical subjects in a variety of mediums. Major works of this nature include Chagall’s Bible series, a set of 105 etchings; the art collection of the *Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall*; his famous *Jerusalem Windows* cycle; and stained-glass windows for two French cathedrals.

As can be imagined, this repetition of biblical subject matter influenced what Jean-Bloch Rosensaft calls the painter’s “corpus of imagery.” Rosensaft observes that this visual alphabet “is the source for virtually every important, monumental project from the 1950s on.”¹² Surely, Chagall’s work for *The Magic Flute* stage designs and costumes is one of these important projects.

Rosensaft further observes that Chagall’s biblical images even re-emerge in works whose topic is not overtly or intentionally religious. Among other examples, Rosensaft cites the mural *The Sources of Music*, a detail of which inspired Chagall with the composition for the present version of the poster image.¹³ Rosensaft concludes that “the Bible becomes so intrinsic to [Chagall’s] imagination that it emerges consciously and unconsciously in many of his works, adding additional layers of meaning open to multiple interpretations.”¹⁴ Albeit, the biblical echoes in the *Magic Flute* poster were not unconscious; they were Chagall’s intent.

Chagall’s Eden Paintings. The Garden of Eden theme in particular was of great significance to Marc Chagall, and he depicted it numerous times in multiple mediums. In fact, Pierre Provoyeur, curator of the *Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall*, describes how Chagall viewed it as his “mission” to portray the paradisiacal theme in paint, thus becoming “partners [with poets and musicians] in the quest for a lost Eden.”¹⁵ A few examples of Chagall’s edenic works suffice in supporting the idea of imagistic crossover in the poster. First, in *Adam and Eve and the Forbidden Fruit* (1958–59)¹⁶ a snake is emerging from a tree trunk, echoing the reptile in the poster. Second, in the drawing entitled *Eden* (1958–59), Adam and Eve appear to be tempted by a rather large bird, as in the poster.¹⁷

Third and most significantly, Provoyeur observes that “Chagall shows his fancy for the Garden of Eden subject through works like *Paradise*” (1958–61).¹⁸ This particular painting arguably bears the strongest resemblance to the poster. The left side of the painting is little more than a

slightly rearranged version of the *Magic Flute* poster. It features two lions, a bird, a winged figure, and a snake spiraling up a tree, all of which surround Adam and Eve in a lush and colorful garden-like environment.¹⁹ These examples provide sufficient evidence that Chagall intentionally reused his biblical symbols in the poster.

Chagall himself hinted at his belief in a direct relationship between the Bible and *The Magic Flute*: “I adore Mozart. . . . He’s a God, and *The Magic Flute* is divine”²⁰ and “I believe in the truth of the Bible, as I believe in the truth of Mozart.”²¹

Edenic Symbols in the Poster. Provided with this background, a closer study of the *Magic Flute* poster as a Garden of Eden parallel reveals many similarities. First, the scene is set within a forest, or garden-like environment. Second, the image features all of the essential elements that define the Garden of Eden event: there is one element that represents Evil, another that represents Good, and an amorous pair around which the scene revolves. In this interpretation, the snake is the infamous biblical symbol of Evil. Although the serpent plays only a marginal role in the opera, it characterizes the poster scene as an allegory of the account in Genesis. Had Chagall merely wanted to include a symbol of evil, surely the Queen of the Night would have sufficed. But he also included the snake, thus allowing the viewer to read the scene in two ways—one narrated by the libretto and another informed by the Bible. Moreover, in a Garden of Eden reading, the dove with the red triangle might serve as a symbol of Deity. In his overtly biblical illustrations, Chagall usually reserves the apex of the composition for the presence of God, whether disguised as a circle, a beam of light, God’s name in Hebrew letters, or any combination of these²² (fig. 3). The upside-down triangle might be interpreted as another symbol for God’s presence.

The Queen and the snake refer to Satan within the edenic context. They are placed as a physical barrier between God’s sphere and that of Adam and Eve, represented by the lions. The lions also make greater sense in this interpretation. In the Garden of Eden account, Adam was made ruler over all animals; the lion is the “king of beasts.” Finally, in establishing the biblical validity of the lions, it is imperative to consider Chagall’s previous use of this animal. Although lions never appear in any of the artist’s secular works, they frequently inhabit his biblical scenes. A few examples support this point: *The Prophet Elijah*, *Bezaleel*, *The Synagogue of Vilnius*, *White Crucifixion*, and *The Prophecy of Isaiah*. The presence of lions in only his biblical works illustrates that Chagall intended the lions in the poster to carry a sacred symbolic meaning.

Clearly, Chagall composed the main characters of the *Magic Flute* poster in the guise of animals who can be interpreted as the main figures

from the biblical Garden of Eden. Thus, not only did Chagall reveal his sentiments for Mozart and the Bible—two of his greatest inspirations—but he managed to reconcile them harmoniously, in humanistic fashion, in a pictorial allegory of good and evil.

Philipp B. Malzl (malzlp@yahoo.com), of Salzburg, Austria, graduated with an MA in art history at Brigham Young University and plans to earn a PhD in German and Austrian art from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with an emphasis on fin-de-siècle Viennese art.

1. Emily Genauer, *Chagall at the 'Met'* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1971), 52.
2. Charles Sorlier, ed., *Chagall by Chagall*, trans. John Shipley (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979), 54.
3. Albert G. Mackey, *An Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Chicago: Masonic History, 1921), 2:802.
4. R. B. Moberly, *Three Mozart Operas* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1968), 226.
5. Moberly, *Three Mozart Operas*, 225.
6. Moberly, *Three Mozart Operas*, 219.
7. Mackey, *Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences*, 2:800.
8. Genauer, *Chagall at the 'Met,'* 53.
9. Genauer, *Chagall at the 'Met,'* 54. See also in this issue of *BYU Studies*, Paul Kerry, “‘Initiates of Isis Now, Come, Enter into the Temple!’: Masonic and Enlightenment Thought in *The Magic Flute*,” 104–29.
10. Genauer, *Chagall at the 'Met,'* 55.
11. Jean Bloch Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible* (New York: Universe Books, 1987), 18.
12. Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible*, 17.
13. Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible*, 17.
14. Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible*, 17.
15. Marc Chagall, *Marc Chagall, Biblical Interpretations*, trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Alpine Fine Arts Collection, 1983), 114.
16. *Adam and Eve and the Forbidden Fruit*, by Marc Chagall, 1958–59, can be easily viewed on the internet.
17. *Eden*, by Marc Chagall, 1958–59, may be found in various publications on Chagall. It is also available as a PDF document from *BYU Studies*.
18. *Paradise*, by Marc Chagall, 1958–61, is available on the internet at sites such as http://www.musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/pages/page_id17989_u12.htm.
19. Other Garden of Eden scenes by Chagall that resemble the poster compositionally: *Adam and Eve Expelled from the Garden of Eden* (1958–61), and *Creation of the World: The Fifth and Sixth Days* (1971–72).
20. Guy Weelen, “Chagall in Full Flight,” in G. di San Lazzaro, ed., *Chagall: Monumental Works* (New York: Tudor Publishing, 1973), 46.
21. Andrew Kagan, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1989), 97.
22. Examples of such symbols can be seen in the artist’s drawings *God Reveals Himself to Moses in the Burning Bush* (1952–57) and *Elijah Revives the Son of the Widow of Zarepath* (1952–57).