A BRIEF NOTE ON FREUD AND MOZART'S 
MAGIC FLUTE

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Wolfang Amadeus Mozart's Magic Flute is usually listed among Freud's favorite operas. Jones (1953), in his report of the three operas he mentioned in the decade of 1880-1890, stated:

Then [after Bizet's Carmen and Mozart's Don Giovanni] there was nothing for two years, when he decided to complete his Mozart education by seeing the Magic Flute [emphasis added]. This proved rather disappointing. "Some of the arias are wonderfully beautiful, but the whole thing rather drags, without any really individual melodies. The action is very stupid, the libretto quite crazy, and it is simply not to be compared with Don Giovanni." (p. 178)

In this statement two points are noteworthy. First, according to the Köchel catalogue, Mozart has nineteen finished operas (Thompson, 1938)! So how could Freud's Mozart education be considered "complete" if he only saw three of these? As I recently highlighted in this Journal, Jones forgot to include The Marriage of Figaro, which he had just mentioned in a previous page (Díaz de Chumaceiro, 1990). Evidently, one has to assume that Jones excluded Mozart's other works from this statement, because only operas are mentioned in the quote. Did Jones, then, with this intriguing remark, simply mean that Freud saw Mozart's last opera?

However, Trosman (1985) recently reminded readers of a bit of previously published data: "At seventeen, offered a choice between Schiller's Die Rauber and Mozart's Magic Flute, he could still opt for The Magic Flute (Freud, 1969)" (emphasis added, p. 74). Perhaps there is a wealth of material on Mozart still waiting to be revealed when all of Freud's letters are finally published.

The second point is that Freud's reaction at this particular performance (from a still unpublished letter) reveals that he was not as ignorant about music as he himself claimed. Wortis (1984), for example, quoted Freud as...
telling him during his analysis: "Ich bin kein grosse Kenner der Musik (I'm no great connoisseur of music)" (p. 25). A comparison of Freud’s opinion with some of the ideas expressed by Marcia Davenport (1932), Mozart’s biographer, supports this argument.

The plot of Die Zauberflöte is absurd. Its combination of morals and magic, Freemasonry and fairytale, allegory and doggerel is laughable. But it is theatre. When the curtain goes up on the first act all the absurdity sinks to triviality, and the essential dramatic power rises up from the stage to engulf the listeners. Wolfgang knew how silly it was in essence. "If we [Mozart and Schikaneder] make a fiasco I cannot help it, for I never wrote a magic opera in my life." What he did write was the first true German music-drama. (p. 349)

Although this opera is "the fountainhead of a new German art," it does not have the universal appeal of Le Nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni (Davenport, 1932, p. 352). Johann Emanuel Schikaneder (1748–1812), Mozart’s librettist of this opera, sang the role of Papageno in the original cast (Thompson, 1938). It seems then, that although Freud may have contributed to the creation of his reputation of not being interested in music, paradoxically, he also left contradictory evidence to disprove his own statements (Diaz de Chumaceiro, 1991).

In effect, a letter from Freud to Ida Bondy Fliess, sent from Aussee, on August 5, 1897, recently published for the first time by Masson (1985), contains a noteworthy parenthetical comment. Freud, addressing Ida as "Excellenza," among other things, wrote: "The little house with two rooms and two windows (similar to Mozart’s in which he composed the Magic Flute), reserved for you, is still standing. It is the same one in which unfortunately I can only write to you but not entice you [to come]" (emphasis added, p. 257).

According to Elenore Fliess, "her mother-in-law was an accomplished amateur pianist" (Masson, 1985, p. 31), a fact Freud clearly knew. Freud’s remark suggests, then, that in addition to liking Mozart’s operas, he was also familiar with his biography.

Interestingly, in The Interpretation of Dreams, Freud (1900) quoted the May-beetle female dreamer’s evocation of two lines of Mozart’s Magic Flute, in response to the term: "Set them free"

Zur Liebe kann ich dich nicht zwingen,
Doch geb ich dir die Freiheit nicht.

[Fear not, to love I’l ne'er compel thee;
Yet 'tis too soon to set thee free.