

## Illusion, Stagecraft, and Music in the Final Transformations of Viennese Magical Operas

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*The Magic Flute* culminates with spectacular flair: its vivid stage descriptions indicate claps of thunder, sinking trap doors, hidden characters revealed, and the sudden transformation of a garden into a sun. Amid the visual havoc, tempestuous strings and boisterous trombones break through from the orchestra. Though striking, endings of this sort were not exclusive to Mozart. Final transformations frequently appear in late-eighteenth-century magical operas. Yet, they could challenge some viewers for whom excessive effects and abrupt changes of scenery defied verisimilitude. Music, however, could alleviate matters.

Staging treatises and performing materials show that music helped negotiate the tension between verisimilitude and spectacle in final transformations. Starting in the 1750s, writers like Charles Batteaux criticized mid-act transformations for disrupting the drama with impossible location changes. Responding to these critiques, Charles-Nicolas Cochin and Franz Ludwig Catel proposed to drop a curtain or dim the lights to smooth scene changes. While theaters across Europe gradually adopted these measures, Viennese magical operas placed transformations in the opera's climax, adding special flair to an otherwise worn-out *deus ex machina*.

Earlier in the century, music rarely accompanied scene changes. However, Viennese operas like *Der Spiegel von Arkadien* (1794) and *Der Königssohn aus Ithaka* (1795) increasingly include music for scenic transformations. In some cases, music increased a transformation's spectacular flair, adding raucous music to visual effects. But music could also smooth a transformation's abruptness by synchronizing with countless moving parts of scenery. In these cases, music seems to guide the viewers through the transformation, attenuating its disruption.