



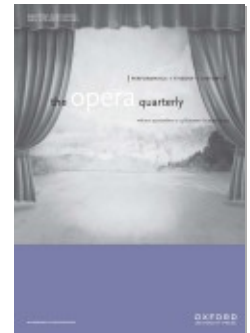
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Artist Commentaries

The CHEAP Collective's *Magic Flute*: An Opera in Six Steps

{ ROGER MATHEW GRANT }

The participants were asked to meet at the northwest corner of Prince and Wooster Streets at 8pm. They were then led, by docents, to a dingy basement crammed with art kitsch, where Vaginal Creme Davis held court. Davis (more typically “Vag”), a Black, queercore, intersex film scholar and performance artist, derives her name from Angela Davis and is legendary for her “terrorist drag.”¹ But in December 2015, she could be found performing the overture to a six-part opera: a distorted *Magic Flute*, “minus Mozart but packed with magic.”² Once participants arrived, they found Davis seated behind a desk in bowlcut wig and dark shades, a mummy replica behind her (Fig. 1). Her recorded voice then came through an answering machine: “Hello, Wolfgang Coloratura Maschinen, this is the Dialectrix of Enlightenment speaking. How may I direct your call?”³

The Magic Flute: An Opera in Six Steps was the American debut project of Berlin-based CHEAP Collective. As Davis explains, “CHEAP is about art, music, and action,” a group of scholars, artists, and activists with Frankfurt School convictions.⁴ At the invitation of visual artist Jonathan Berger, CHEAP’s opera project took over the Winter 2015 season at NYU’s 80WSE Gallery and brought together a crew of improbable collaborators: filmmaker Michel Auder, composer Jamie Stewart (of the band Xiu Xiu), lighting designer Jackie Shemesh, with CHEAP collective actress Susanne Sachsse as director and Davis as librettist. I took on the role of dramaturge.

The work we ultimately created was a live piece of performance art that took place in and around 80WSE from December 1–5 of 2015. The piece began, with Davis’s overture, in a warehouse space within the basement of the Leslie-Lohman Museum. Led back to 80WSE, participants experienced five more living tableaux as they wound their way through the gallery. Each room in the space contained a pivotal scene derived from Mozart and Schikaneder’s *Die Zauberflöte*, with site-specific installation work by BFA students from New York University, animated by a host of countless performers. In the final room, Stewart conducted the New York Choral



Figure 1 *Vaginal Creme Davis* in *The Magic Flute* (2015), *overture*.

Society and a pick-up orchestra, his original score reverberating through the building.

It is difficult to describe, with any precision, what happened in this opera installation. This is because such a huge group of individuals contributed, each building layers of specificity, reference, and intention into every moment of the work. Let me give you an example: entering the first room of the gallery, participants found the young artist Zachary Schoenhut lying prone on a table in a bodysuit that was intended to resemble the body paint worn by Beverly Grant playing the role of the Cobra Woman in Jack Smith's 1964 experimental film *Normal Love*. All of this, of course, was supposed to conjure the snake from the opening of the first scene in *Die Zauberflöte*. Here is another: in the second room, participants encountered a mountain-shaped installation fitted with gloryholes, allowing the performers inside the structure to expose single body parts to those in the room. Ears, elbow, breasts, and butt popped out. These were supposed to reference the goddess Cybele—a mythical mountain queen that Carolyn Abbate has linked with the Queen of the Night—since the former was said to have been accompanied by eunuchs carrying their missing body parts in boxes.⁵ Or, consider the mummy behind Davis in the opening scene, which was meant to refer to the mummified remains of Robert Wells discovered in the apartment of Dorian Corey, the queen featured prominently

in *Paris is Burning* (1990). None of these things even formed the major component of the tableaux in which they appeared.

Our purpose here, in discussing CHEAP's *Magic Flute*, will be a bit like Tamino's in *Die Zauberflöte*—that is to say, a misguided search for the truth. Tamino's encounter with the menacing snake in the opening scene of Mozart's Singspiel is our first clue that his journey is all about knowledge. It is, in a way, about “liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty,” the same purpose that Horkheimer and Adorno assign to the project of enlightenment itself.⁶ Tamino endeavors to rescue Pamina from shadowy unknowns in a quest that draws on his noble virtue and mastery of self-knowledge. Instrumental reason is both theme and metaphor. But the instruments in *Die Zauberflöte* are magic, and the reunion of prince and princess occurs not because of but in spite of the former's search. In the character of Tamino, then, “enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude.”⁷ The hunt for truth and pure insight turns out to rely upon a huge article of faith: the myth that knowledge knows no bounds, and that all facts are knowable in the first place.⁸

These insights are drawn directly from Horkheimer and Adorno, but something similar happened in *The Magic Flute*. Our creative team spent an entire season detailing hyper-specific and nested references into each costume, each element of the installation's visual components, each line of text in Davis's libretto. The multimedia ensemble work was thus too rich; it was awash in too many overlapping plans and purposes to have any hope of decipherability. Maybe all opera is a bit like this, so flush with meaning that it can end up opaque, demanding, hard to figure out. In this way our *Magic Flute* followed *Die Zauberflöte* in a tradition of opera very much concerned with the mysteries of music's power.⁹

GENESIS AND STRUCTURE

With a collaboration this large and diffuse, it's hard to locate any precise point of origin. But the notion that the project would entail the installation of an opera into an art gallery came from Jonathan Berger. A sculptor and installation artist at the NYU Steinhart Department of Art and Art Professions, Berger had rotated into the position of Director of the 80WSE gallery. The idea of creating a distorted *Magic Flute* took hold in Berger's early conversations with CHEAP. As Davis later explained in an *Artforum* interview, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* formed her first, childhood experience of opera in the elegant Shrine Auditorium of Los Angeles. The work—especially the hyperbolic Queen of the Night—had stuck with her since.

It's always been at the back of my mind to incorporate *The Magic Flute* into something, and then I told Jonathan [Berger] about it, and he said “Sure, why not? We could get an orchestra!” I said: “Oooh, yes! An orchestra and a chorus!” and it just

kept getting grander and grander, and I said, this has got to be the first CHEAP Collective project in America. . . . Get rid of the libretto, get rid of, even the Mozart music!¹⁰

Planning in early 2014 focused precisely on this: how to fit something like an opera, with its considerable dramatic and musical dimensions, into the intimate spaces of a gallery.

As the principal team coalesced, collaborative conversations played with and against the physical constraints that the gallery imposed. Berger and Sachsse initially planned various scenarios that involved beginning in the wrong space, or very late at night, or forcing participants to wait around for hours; all of this eventually found expression in starting the work at the Leslie-Lohman basement. Nevertheless, the 80WSE gallery walls gave shape to the structure of the five tableaux that were to take place there. The only possible location for Stewart to conduct a choir and an orchestra was the fifth and final room; this meant that participants heard his score somewhat distantly upon entering and approached the sound source as they made their way through the gallery spaces.

More to the point, 80WSE's five rooms plus the Leslie-Lohman basement provided for us the form of six scenes, or "six steps." Our ultimate goal was to use site-specific work and human performers to create something like a living sculpture or tableau vivant in each space. Hence, an overture and five tableaux. Each focused on a different moment in *Die Zauberflöte* and was meant to retell, remix, and reconfigure it.

Davis's recorded voice might have been the single unifying element in participants' experience of the work. The overcrowded Leslie-Lohman basement, where they began, was festooned with false memorabilia including small figurines of *Magic Flute* characters. The sounds were small also, as two different devices played recorded overture text over the hushed scuffs and shuffles of the participants in this dusty space. Davis, in her monologue for the overture, hinted of a Turing test: a procedure for determining if a machine can imitate rational human thought.

Back at 80WSE, Davis's recorded voice emanated from her mummy replica (see Fig. 1), which CHEAP's Marc Seigel wheeled through the gallery alongside participants. Sachsse served as master of ceremonies, activating each moment in the performance. Appropriately, the first tableau was derived from the opening scene of the opera. Alex Casso played Tamino, lying naked, prone, in an empty display vitrine. Schoenhut, as the snake, lay across the room on a table of adjustable height (at one point in the planning a forklift had been cast in the role of snake). Chris Blue played a spirit (see Fig. 2). Davis's recorded text for this scene cleverly linked *Die Zauberflöte*'s cult of Isis with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Performers in each scene tried to keep movements minimal, since any notion of stage performance in these small rooms felt incongruous. But some scenes had a central action. In the



Figure 2 From left: Chris Blue, Alex Casso, and Zachary Schoenhut in Tableau 1 of *The Magic Flute* (2015).

first tableau, Tamino arched his back while the snake slowly pulled a long string from his rectum, in a delicious doubling of serpent imagery.

Mark Schulte, a participant who saw *The Magic Flute* live, described Tableau 2 to me as “completely abject.” This room, with the gloryhole-punctured mountain, depicted Monostatos’s attempted rape of Pamina in the final scene of act 1. Aliza Shvarts, as Pamina, sat atop the mountain draped in colored cloth and hidden inside a semi-opaque hexagonal corneous, which was lit from below (Fig. 3). Jennifer Miller, a widely celebrated circus creator and bearded, cis-female, experimental performer, played Monostatos. In this scene, Pamina’s naked body was slowly revealed, a watermelon between her legs. Monostatos scaled the mountain in order to eat it slowly and graphically. While all of this unfolded, Dave Perrett as Papageno appeared from behind the mountain, attempting to glimpse Pamina through a mirror. Of the watermelon-simulated sex, Davis explained to me: “The reference for this image is from the beautiful Taiwanese film *A Wayward Cloud* [(2005), directed by Tsai Ming-liang], so it doesn’t have quite the same context as how this particular fruit is seen in *Miss US of KKK*.”¹¹ Davis’s provocation here is quite clear. Her recorded text for the tableau fictionalized a narrative for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a bake-off against ISIS with a half-time show from Busby Berkeley.

Tableau 3 marked the opening of act 2, indexing the world of Sorastro and the Priests. Participants stood around the edges of the room, which was almost entirely taken up by a painted wooden box with horns protruding. Its surface textured in



Figure 3 Aliza Shvarts in Tableau 2 of *The Magic Flute* (2015).

different shades of white with golden chain imagery, the box contained within it a talking choir composed of students from the New School (directed by Joshua Lubin-Levy). This group chanted excerpts from Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* at our participants, in a moment in which *The Magic Flute* allowed itself to be as plainly pedantic as Mozart and Schikaneder. "Myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them."¹² It was thrilling to hear this shouted out by college students.

I was the principal performer of Tableau 4, which was meant to take the place of the Queen of the Night's famous act 2 aria. The basic idea here was to focus on the Queen's vibrating larynx instead of her voice or character. Participants stepped up to elevated risers that bordered the room; a model of a vocal cord hung from the ceiling. NYU faculty artist Jesse Bransford handled the visual installation of this tableau in his signature cabbalistic style (Fig. 4); he also performed in the scene, donning a white coat and busily fussing with his own mural on the far wall. I lay supine on a huge circular turntable of Bransford's design. The text for this tableau was a macaronic monologue I recited, which I had composed in collaboration with Sachsse and Davis. The text contained quotations from LaMettrie, Diderot, Galen, Leroi-Gourhan, Caroline Abbate, and Alan Turing, linking back to Davis's overture.

The final Tableau was the least tied to any particular scene in *Die Zauberflöte* but was nevertheless the most musical. In this fifth and last space of the gallery, participants found Stewart and his ensemble, the source of the score they had been hearing since their arrival at 80WSE. Here the opera turned for a moment into a gallery

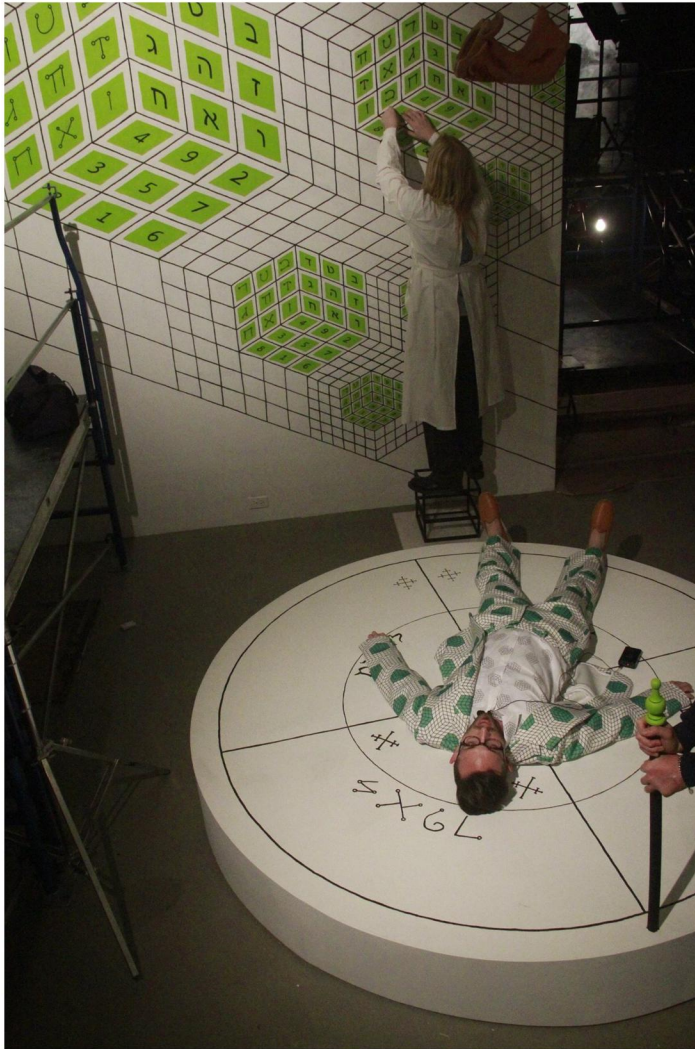


Figure 4 Jesse Bransford and Roger Grant in Tableau 4 of *The Magic Flute* (2015).

concert, the audience pressed against walls. Stewart's freshly composed music was dramatic in its flair, with heavy homorhythmic gestures and textless choral punctuations. Following a valedictory orchestral swell, Stewart and Sachsse provided one final moment of magic; the opera ended with a tiny, tender duet, nearly whispered between these two as they crouched before the giant moon mural on the final back wall.

SUBTRACTION AND SATURATION

Early in our planning for the work, Sachsse compared *The Magic Flute* project to Carmelo Bene's 1970 film *Don Giovanni*. Bene, an experimental filmmaker, actor,

and director, was widely known for his critical transformations of classic works of theater and opera. “This is the definitive inspiration for me,” Sachsse wrote in the summer of 2014, “and as Gilles Deleuze describes Carmelo Bene’s work with subtraction: I also would like somehow to subtract or amputate the narrative from *Magic Flute* in order to come to bigger themes.”¹³ Sachsse refers here to Deleuze’s “One Manifesto Less,” an examination of Bene and his distinctive technique. For Deleuze, Bene’s extreme reconfiguration of previous works—such as Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* or Shakespeare’s *Richard III*—afforded him creative potential precisely through the process of removal and subtraction. Eliminating characters, dialogue, traditional narrative form, even speech itself, entails a fundamental critique of the work’s means of representation. “But what remains? Everything remains,” Deleuze writes, “under a new light, with new sounds, new gestures.”¹⁴ In his descriptions of these palimpsest pieces, Deleuze relies heavily on musical metaphor, describing Bene’s transpositions, continuous variations, and rhythms; “the writing and gestures of CB are musical,” he offers, employing music here as something of a stand-in for a dynamic play of forms.¹⁵

Like much of Bene’s output, *The Magic Flute* lost any semblance of its traditional plot, its major joints and features, and of course it lost Mozart’s music. Stewart provided a new soundtrack to undergird the play of rhythm and continuous variation running through our drama. But in a recent discussion, Stewart and I admitted to each other that this layering effect within the work made it almost impossible to understand the relationship of one component to the next. “The entire thing was somehow spread throughout a number of different consciousnesses,” Stewart said, “but no one had the whole thing.”¹⁶

What was *The Magic Flute*? An opera, or installation? A site-specific work, an adaptation, or piece of performance art? In a certain sense the project was an effort, on the part of a group of assorted practitioners, to try out one art form in the shape of another; an experiment to see what an opera might have to say when placed in and around an art gallery. But in the subtraction we all contributed to, our resulting product was saturated in brand new surfaces that were themselves layered with a consistent theme of too much.

In its subtraction, then, *The Magic Flute* achieved a saturation that was nearly impossible for its creators to penetrate. This allowed *The Magic Flute* to admit of the fundamental queerness of opera as a multi-media artform; it was true to the original peculiarity of *opera* in the sense of “work,” a kind of collective doing or making that is somehow musical in nature. But in its obsession with detail, with its layered texts and actions and its nested sets of references, there was a sense in which “nothing at all may remain outside.”¹⁷ *The Magic Flute* was re-mythologized in this work in the same way that the Enlightenment project of universal knowledge was always a fantasy—a myth. Ultimately, then, *The Magic Flute* was probably less about a gallery

taking on the artform of opera than it was about the CHEAP collective tackling one of the capstone artworks of the Enlightenment.

Perhaps, as I have suggested, all opera suffers from the challenge of opacity in its saturation of signification through multiple media. If so then *The Magic Flute* was truly an opera about opera. It was a musical work about a musical work about the power of music, creating an infinite, recursive loop that ultimately meant everything might actually have been just what it was: a string in a butthole, a vibrating vocal cord, an instance of harmony.

NOTES

Roger Mathew Grant is a theorist and historian of music and culture with particular interests in affect theory, the history of music theory, and eighteenth-century music. His journal articles have appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, *Representations*, *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Eighteenth-Century Music*, and the *Journal of Music Theory*. Grant's first book, *Beating Time and Measuring Music in the Early Modern Era*, won the 2016 Emerging Scholar Award from the Society for Music Theory. In addition to teaching at Wesleyan, he has also been Visiting Professor in the music departments at both Harvard and Yale. Grant's most recent book, *Peculiar Attunements: How Affect Theory Turned Musical*, was published with Fordham University Press (2020). He is currently serving as the Dean of Arts and Humanities at Wesleyan University.

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3. CHEAP Collective, *The Magic Flute: An Opera in Six Steps* (2015), archival materials.

4. "Vaginal Davis and Susanne Sachsse Talk about Their Restaging of *The Magic Flute*," *Artforum*; accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/video/vaginal-davis-and-susanne-sachsse-talk-about-their-restaging-of-the-magic-flute-56441>.

5. See Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 86–87.

6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 3.

7. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 27.

8. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§ 527–29, pp. 321–24. On this particular aspect of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, see Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's "Phenomenology of Spirit,"* trans. Samuel Cherniak and John Heckman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 426–47.

9. I owe this reading of *Die Zauberflöte* to Carolyn Abbate, "Magic Flute, Nocturnal Sun," in *In Search of Opera*, 55–106.

10. "Vaginal Davis and Susanne Sachsse Talk about their Restaging of *The Magic Flute*," *Artforum*; accessed August 24, 2021, <https://www.artforum.com/video/vaginal-davis-and-susanne-sachsse-talk-about-their-restaging-of-the-magic-flute-56441>.

11. Vaginal Davis, email to the author, January 12, 2015.

12. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.

13. Susanne Sachsse, email to the author, August 3, 2014.

14. Gilles Deleuze, "One Manifesto Less," in *The Deleuze Reader*, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 211; on subtraction in Deleuze, see Ronald Bogue, *Deleuze and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 137–49.

15. Deleuze, "One Manifesto Less," 215.

16. Jamie Stewart, interview with the author, February 28, 2021.

17. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 16.