

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Catherine G. Wagley, "Sweet Melodies: Frances Stark Stages Mozart's 'Magic Flute' in Los Angeles," *Art News*, May, 2017

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Title cards from Frances Stark's *The Magic Flute* (2017). COURTESY THE ARTIST

"You know Mozart died five and a half weeks after the debut, so there's something very intense about this work," Frances Stark said last Friday night, introducing her film version of the composer's *The Magic Flute* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Mozart wrote his opera, with the help of the eccentric librettist Emanuel Schikaneder, in 1791, and was already ill when he conducted its first performance. The unlikely story of a search for a missing princess, it incorporates spoken word and is scored for a mix of virtuosic vocalists and comic actors. Productions of it tend to be lavish.

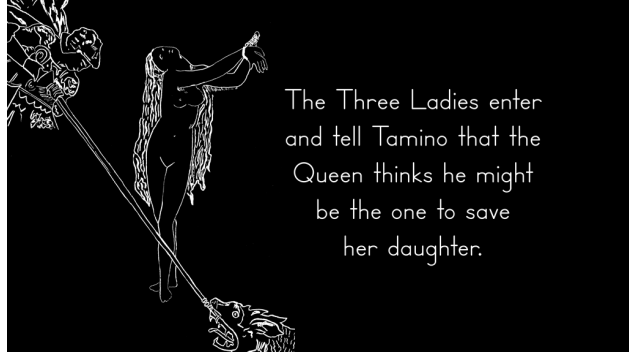
Stark has been working on her own *Magic Flute* for two years. Hers is cartoonishly minimal, and includes no vocal parts at all. Instead, the lyrics, an amalgam of various past translations (the original libretto is in German), appear against a black screen, the font and color of the text tailored to each character. Graphics occasionally appear onscreen too, and sometimes words twist, spin, or expand. Soloists from the small orchestra of teens and adolescents that Stark assembled last year play along with the text, different instruments assigned to different characters. A trumpeter named Michael Davis is the opera's hero, Prince Tamino, his melancholic sound accompanying the prince's often ridiculous, bright yellow words. At the very beginning of the opera, Tamino wails in fear before fainting because of a snake.

Initially, Stark, a veteran L.A. artist whose large text paintings of [an acerbic Ian Svenonius essay currently hang in the Whitney Biennial](#), imagined making a rap opera, which was loosely what she proposed as a nominee for the Absolut Vodka Art Award, which she won in 2015 and used to fund the project.

"Why specifically *The Magic Flute*?" [writer Emily McDermott asked Stark](#) in May 2015. "Well, partially it's delightful," Stark replied, before talking about DJ Quik, the Compton-bred rapper with whom she hoped to collaborate. She became interested in working with Quik, who spent time in solitary confinement in 2006 for allegedly pistol-whipping his sister when she purportedly threatened to kidnap his kids, after reading an interview with him. Quik said that "he thinks his talent has been wasted in hip-hop and he'd like to go somewhere else," recalled Stark, who publicly left her tenured position at the University of Southern California's art school in 2015, after DJ Quik's former collaborator Dr. Dre gave a large donation and attempted to corporatize the school's arts program. (One of many dramas at the school at the time.) "I felt like my talents were being wasted in art school," Stark added. She also noted that DJ Quik's album *Rhythm-al-ism* was flute heavy and hypersexual, just like the opera.

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The rapper, in the end, “was not as easy to entice as Stark [. . .] had hoped,” as Jonathan Griffin put it in his [April 24 Guardian article](#). She found her eventual collaborators thanks to a fortuitous visit to Pizzanista, a downtown pizza joint run by pro-skateboarder Salman Agah. Agah introduced Stark to his sister, Ameena Maria Khawaja, a vocalist and cellist who has worked with youth orchestras, and her boyfriend, composer Danko Drusko. Khawaja and Drusko became her new collaborators. Drusko would simplify the complex score, adapting it for a handful of musicians and changing the vocal parts to instrumental solos. Khawaja would help Stark find, audition, and then rehearse young musicians from around L.A. Producer H.B. Barnum helped hone the recording. “This is an enormous piece,” Stark said Friday night, implying the immensity of the effort.



The Three Ladies enter and tell Tamino that the Queen thinks he might be the one to save her daughter.

Watching Stark’s *Magic Flute* is like spending two hours reading the stop-animation version of a children’s book, albeit one with an impressively customized soundtrack. The story, which begins with Tamino’s snake-induced fainting spell, only becomes more absurd. The Queen of the Night, on whose land Tamino finds himself when he comes to, irrationally decides that Tamino is the one to save her daughter from the sorcerer named Sarastro who kidnapped her. She gives him a magic flute to ward off enemies and pairs him up with a chatty bird catcher named Papageno, who goes on and on about how few bird catchers the world has. An 18-year-old bassoonist named Kahayla Rapolla gives Papageno his appropriately reedy, bouncy sound.

Once Tamino and Papageno arrive at the sorcerer’s kingdom, they’re surprised by how nice it is; everyone there seems to really like the alleged kidnapper, Sarastro. After a stint in a special order resembling the Freemasons, Tamino stays on. So do the princess and Papageno, but in the grips of despair they both independently attempt suicide and have to be saved by a marauding trio of young boys. In the end, all survive their bouts of depression and marry their true loves.

Once, the same animated, sexualized Lego-like figures that Stark used to narrate her film *My Best Thing* (which features online chats about sex) appear onscreen, illustrating the impromptu dance party that Papageno and princess Pamina have in Pamina’s cell. But otherwise, Stark’s animation approach remains rudimentary, the simplicity making the story more legible than it would be if cluttered by sets, props, and costumes.

“[Stark] produces a work of art that can show or teach us about meaning and the possibilities of art,” wrote LACMA curator Christine Y. Kim, introducing Stark’s project [on the museum’s blog](#). This sounds frustratingly didactic, but Stark herself has repeatedly referred to this as a “pedagogical opera.” She has also talked about it as a way to reach a different audience, a way to “shift out of the MFA situation” as she said in 2015, and focus on bringing art to younger people.

While *The Magic Flute* is pleasant enough to watch, the significance of the project lies more in the fact that it was done at all. Stark’s adaptation made the opera more accessible to young performers, literally involving them and perhaps serving as a model for how artists can funnel resources into arts education without becoming bogged down by bureaucracy. Her own aesthetic doesn’t dominate, though it’s there, along with her attraction to the eccentric. At the end of the extended, all-text credit sequence, she offers special thanks to librettist Schikaneder, noting that the visionary non-conformist who initially convinced Mozart to write this weird and bawdy opera died alone and insane in Budapest. Stark and her orchestra aimed to do him proud.