

Don Giovanni
Historical Background
by Stephen Willier

When the Mozart-Da Ponte *opera buffa* *Le nozze di Figaro* was first heard in Vienna in 1786 it was, as with too much of Mozart's music, not recognized as the masterpiece it was. There was, however, a place nearby that was mad about Mozart: Prague, with its love of Italian opera and an astonishing musical tradition from which famous wind players sprang. *Le nozze di Figaro* and a number of Mozart's other works, including the "Prague" symphony, were given there in January of 1787. As Mozart described in one of his letters, one could not walk down the street without hearing tunes from *Figaro* hummed and whistled. Nothing would do but that the Italian Theater in Prague must have its own new Mozart opera. For this, Mozart and his librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte (a friend of Casanova and quite an adventurer himself), settled on the Spanish Renaissance legend of Don Juan, the great profligate, rake, debaucher, seducer, and (his greatest sin because he refuses redemption) blasphemer.

The character of Don Juan had by the 1780s received many literary and dramatic treatments from *commedia dell'arte* to Molière and Carlo Goldoni, the great Venetian comic librettist. Premiered in October of 1787, on the eve of the French Revolution as it were, Mozart's Don Juan is plunged into the fires of Hell for his aristocratic abuse of power. He is a vampiristic character, seeking to despoil young virgins under cover of darkness and in disguise. Mozart's music, while preserving a façade of comic opera, often veers into the demonic. The very opening of the overture, the first music one hears, is a vivid portrayal of Don Giovanni's fate. One hears the tread of the statue, the wailing of the damned, the crackling of the flames leaping up out of the underworld. It is a veritable Dante's *Inferno* in music. Goethe remarked that Mozart--on the evidence of his *Don Giovanni*--was the only composer capable of setting his *Faust* to music.

Because of Don Giovanni's character the plot of the opera is very loose, a picaresque series of adventures moving from one attempt at conquest to another. There are only four main events that were an obligatory part of the story: the death of the Commendatore, the recitation of the catalogue (audiences anticipated it and loved it because of its ribald nature), the statue's invitation to dinner, and Don Giovanni's fall into the abyss. Within this loose plot structure there is ample room for virtuosic arias, and all of the characters except Don Giovanni have their star turns. Giovanni has a "party song" and a serenade but no true arias, for arias are too psychologically telling and he is neither introspective nor revealing of his character. He is a hormone-driven "party animal," yet not at all crude, but rather suave, elegant, aristocratic, telling each woman what she wants most to hear: "I will marry you." It is therefore an ingenious comic touch on the part of Da Ponte that Don Giovanni is "0 for 3" with the women at the end of act 1, despite the evidence of the catalogue.

Don Giovanni is, in the words of one of its greatest admirers, E. T. A. Hoffmann (short story writer, opera composer, librettist, impresario), "the opera of operas." It is one of the cornerstones of art in Western civilization, open to myriad interpretations, always revealing something new with each hearing, not only about the world of 1787 but about the state of humankind universally. As with *Le nozze di Figaro*, a class struggle is being played out. Mozart has clearly delineated social status musically by voice type, tonality, instrumentation, and contour of melodic line. Mozart has shown in myriad ways society's disapproval of Don Giovanni's actions. It is not that Mozart was a prude--far from it--but the high-handed, self-serving ways of the aristocracy are not to be tolerated much longer. If the audience is laughing raucously at Leporello's catalogue aria, Mozart has musically embedded Don Giovanni's doom within it: listen for the dark turn to the minor mode when Leporello speaks of Giovanni's predilection for "the beginner." Vampires notoriously seek virgins on their wedding nights, as Giovanni does with Zerlina.

I heartily suggest returning to this "opera of operas" many times, getting to know it well. You will be richer for it and you will be in the company of great thinkers such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Søren Kierkegaard, and George Bernard Shaw, all of whom found Mozart's opera an indispensable part of their lives.

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