Don Giovanni

An Opera in Two Acts

Based on the legend of Don Juan

Music by W.A. Mozart
Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte

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Don Giovanni

Premiere

First performance on October 29, 1787 at the Estates Theatre in Prague, Czech Republic.

Cast of Characters

Don Giovanni, a nobleman	Baritone
Il Commendatore, Donna Anna's father	Bass
Donna Anna, a noblewoman	Soprano
Don Ottavio, a nobleman	Tenor
Donna Elvira, a noblewoman	Soprano
Leporello, Don Giovanni's servant	Bass
Masetto, a peasant	Bass
Zerlina, a peasant	Soprano
Chorus	

2024-2025 Season
Brief Summary

Don Giovanni, who is a sexually promiscuous and arrogant nobleman, relentlessly pursues women, seducing and discarding them at will. After assaulting Donna Anna, The Commendatore challenges Giovanni to a duel during which Giovanni kills him. Don Ottavio, Donna Anna's fiancé, swears vengeance on Giovanni.

Meanwhile, Giovanni continues his escapades, attempting to seduce Donna Elvira, whom he had previously abandoned. He also attempts to seduce Zerlina, a peasant woman about to marry fellow peasant, Masetto.

Giovanni's behavior eventually catches up with him. The Commendatore's statue comes to life and warns Giovanni of his impending doom, but he remains unrepentant. The statue drags Giovanni down to hell, symbolizing his ultimate punishment for his immoral deeds.

Detailed Synopsis

Original setting: 17th Century Seville, Spain
Virginia Opera setting: Modern day

ACT I
Scene 1

Leporello is pacing back and forth, waiting impatiently for his master to appear. He grumbles about the life of a servant. When Don Giovanni enters suddenly, he hides. Giovanni is pursued by Donna Anna, who tries to tear the cloak from his face and discover his identity (it is revealed later that he has entered Donna Anna's bedchamber and attempted to assault her). She cries for help and runs off as her father, the Commendatore, enters. He challenges Giovanni to a duel; Giovanni refuses to fight so old an opponent, but the Commendatore insists and, after a brief combat, falls mortally wounded. Giovanni and Leporello escape just as Donna Anna enters, followed by her fiancé, Don Ottavio, and several servants.

Donna Anna is horrified to discover her father's body and is consoled by Ottavio. Her mood shifts from grief to anger, as she demands that Ottavio help her take vengeance for her father's murder.

Scene 2

Don Giovanni and Leporello enter, deep in conversation. Leporello is chiding his master for leading a wicked life, but Giovanni's mind is already fixed on finding a new conquest. Even at this very moment he smells a woman's perfume and they both step aside as Donna Elvira enters. She sings of her pain and anger at being abandoned by her lover, and vows that should she find him she will "tear out his heart," a phrase which she repeats several times.

Giovanni, not recognizing Elvira, approaches her and tries to console the "poverina" (poor girl). Giovanni finds, to his embarrassment, that Elvira is the woman he formerly seduced, married, and then abandoned. She reproaches him bitterly, but he escapes and leaves Leporello to explain everything. The servant attempts to console her, saying that Giovanni is really not worth bothering about; she is neither the first nor will she be the last. In further explanation, he produces a "non piccolo libro" (a "not very small book"), a catalog listing his master's various conquests, and proceeds to describe Giovanni's varied taste in feminine beauty. The figures are impressive—six hundred and forty women in Italy, two hundred and thirty-one in Germany, one

hundred in France, ninety-one in Turkey, and one thousand and three in Spain. Elvira exits, outraged.

Scene 3

A group of peasants are singing and dancing, celebrating the forthcoming marriage of their friends Zerlina and Masetto. Don Giovanni enters with Leporello, and is instantly attracted to the pretty young Zerlina and wishes to be alone with her. Masetto protests, but is discouraged by a threatening gesture from Giovanni. He yields grudgingly and exits with Leporello and the other peasants, leaving Zerlina alone with the Don. He flatters her and, to her great surprise, offers to marry her himself. She is resistant at first, but begins to waver and eventually succumbs to his cries of "Vieni!" ("Come!") She agrees to marry him.

Giovanni and Zerlina are about to exit, arm in arm, when Donna Elvira appears suddenly and warns Zerlina about Giovanni. She exits, taking Zerlina with her. Giovanni complains to himself that everything seems to be going wrong today. Donna Anna enters with Don Ottavio. Not recognizing Don Giovanni as her assailant (and her father's murderer), Anna asks for his friendship and assistance. As Anna is explaining her situation to Giovanni, Elvira enters. Elvira once again denounces Don Giovanni, warning the newcomers not to trust him. Giovanni says that she is mad; Anna and Ottavio are unsure who to believe – Elvira or Giovanni.

Elvira exits, followed by Don Giovanni. No sooner does he leave than Donna Anna cries out "O Dei!" ("Oh my God!"). She has recognized Giovanni's voice as that of her nocturnal assailant. Anna describes to Ottavio the details of the attempted assault - how Giovanni, his face concealed by a cloak, tried to assault her, and how she struggled to free herself, crying for help. She concludes her narrative with a brief description of her father's murder, and once more calls on Don Ottavio to exact retribution.

Anna leaves Don Ottavio to reflect upon the situation. He finds it difficult to believe that a nobleman could commit such a horrific crime.

Ottavio departs, clearing the way for Leporello, who grumbles that at all costs he must quit working for Giovanni. Giovanni joins him and the servant tells his master about the most recent turn of events. Giovanni is completely unphased and looks forward to the approaching festivities. Before the night is over, he says, he will add another dozen names to his catalog.

Scene 4

Peasants are chattering, wandering about, or lying asleep on the ground, feeling the effects of the wine which Leporello has dispensed. Amongst them are Zerlina and Masetto, in the midst of a quarrel. Masetto accuses his fiancée of being unfaithful and deserting him on his wedding day; she assures him that she has been true to him.

Just as Masetto is won over, Giovanni's voice is heard from off-stage; the hotheaded peasant grows instantly suspicious of Zerlina's nervous reaction. Masetto hides and observes as Giovanni enters and flirts with Zerlina when, to his surprise, out steps Masetto. Giovanni lightly reproaches Masetto for leaving his bride-to-be alone.

Donna Elvira, Donna Anna, and Don Ottavio enter, disguised beneath cloaks and masks. Leporello notices the three masked figures and, at Giovanni's instructions, invites them to join the party. They accept.

Scene 5

Don Giovanni is entertaining his guests with Leporello's assistance. Masetto warns Zerlina to be cautious, but Giovanni continues to flirt openly with her. Three masked attendees arrive at the party; Giovanni and Leporello welcome them.

As the guests are dancing, Don Giovanni pulls Zerlina aside, closely followed by Leporello. A moment later Zerlina is heard screaming for help, prompting Masetto and the masked attendees to rush to her aid. Don Giovanni quickly appears, dragging Leporello and accusing him of being the guilty party. Giovanni's ruse fails to convince the three masked attendees; they remove their disguises and denounce Don Giovanni, warning him that he will be punished and that the entire world shall know of his crimes. In the ensuing confusion, Giovanni manages to escape.

ACT II
Scene 1

Having evaded his pursuers, Giovanni enters with Leporello, who is once again threatening to leave his master. Leporello accepts Giovanni's bribe and changes his mind. At the moment, he is particularly interested in wooing Donna Elvira's pretty young maid. To win her over, he will disguise himself as one of her own class, and forces Leporello to exchange clothes with him.

Donna Elvira sings sadly of her love for Don Giovanni. He hides behind Leporello (who is able to pass for his master in the darkness) and answers her with flattery and pleas for forgiveness.
At first Elvira resists, but when Giovanni threatens suicide she relents. Giovanni moves into the shadows and watches as Leporello approaches her in the character of his master and addresses her affectionately. A comic scene ensues, with Elvira quite serious and Leporello obviously enjoying playing the gentleman. Suddenly Giovanni leaps out, pretending to be an attacker, and frightens them away, leaving himself alone to serenade Elvira's maid.

Before the object of his affections can appear, Masetto enters with a group of peasants. They are searching for Don Giovanni with murder on their minds. Mistaken for Leporello, the Don deceitfully offers to help them and he sends them off in different directions.

The men exit, leaving Masetto behind. Giovanni gives Masetto a good, hard beating before making his escape. Zerlina enters to find her fiancé lying on the ground, bruised and moaning. She comforts him, saying that her love can cure his pain.

Scene 2

Leporello enters with Donna Elvira. He has tired of this ruse and is anxious to rid himself of her. In the darkness, he searches for an escape as Elvira pleads with him not to leave her (still believing him to be Giovanni). Just as Leporello locates an exit, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio arrive, dressed in mourning. They once again lament the Commendatore's death. Next Zerlina and Masetto enter and prevent Leporello and Elvira from escaping. All think that Leporello is Giovanni and hurl accusations at him, threatening him with death. Only Elvira is sympathetic; she identifies herself, surprising everyone, and pleads for mercy upon the man whom she believes to be Giovanni. The others remain unmoved and converge upon Leporello, who quickly falls to his knees and admits his true identity. All express their amazement, after which Anna exits.

Don Ottavio announces his intention to inform authorities of Giovanni's crime and have him arrested. He asks Elvira, Zerlina, and Masetto to remain with Donna Anna and console her with the assurance that vengeance is forthcoming.

Scene 3

Don Giovanni exchanges cloaks with Leporello, who is complaining about his narrow escape from a beating. Their exchange is interrupted by a sinister voice announcing that Giovanni's frivolity will end before dawn. The two men eventually realize that the voice comes from the statue of the Commendatore.

Giovanni orders Leporello to read the inscription on the statue. "Here I await vengeance on the villain who took my life." The Don insists that Leporello extend an invitation to dinner. The superstitious, terrified Leporello hesitates but finally offers the invitation. The statue nods in acceptance; undaunted, Giovanni repeats the offer and is answered with a solemn "Yes." Master and servant leave to prepare for the dinner.

Scene 4

Don Ottavio once again attempts to console Donna Anna with assurances of Giovanni's punishment, and suggests that they may soon be wed. Anna rebukes him for speaking of marriage while she is still in mourning. He calls her cruel; she entreats him not to reproach her and reassures him of her love.

Scene 5

A table is set for supper. Giovanni orders his musicians to play as he sits down to dine. In a comic scene, Giovanni comments on the deliciousness of the food and wine, making the hungry Leporello's mouth water until the servant furtively snatches a few bites for himself. Elvira rushes in, voicing her love and pity for Giovanni and pleading on her knees for him to change his life. He mocks her, brazenly raising a toast to women and wine, and she exits, denouncing him. Upon her exit, she screams violently and rushes out by another way. Giovanni sends Leporello to investigate, and the servant also screams in terror, running back in with the news that the statue is approaching.

Giovanni orders Leporello to set another place at the table, but the statue explains that, being dead, it cannot eat mortal food. Instead, it invites Giovanni to go dine with it. Leporello attempts to decline for his master, but Giovanni accepts. The statue repeatedly demands that he repent, but the Don defiantly refuses. The statue disappears as flames engulf Giovanni and an invisible chorus of demons summons him to hell. With a final, anguished cry he disappears in the fire.

As the smoke clears, Donna Anna, Don Ottavio, Donna Elvira, Zerlina, and Masetto, and Leporello unite in singing the moral of the story: “He who wrought for selfish pleasure shall depart without a friend.”

About the composer

Generally considered one of the world's greatest musical geniuses, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756-1791) adult life was filled with frustration and poverty. Although he created some of the most well-known music, he died poor and unrecognized by his peers, laid to rest in an unmarked pauper's grave.

Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria on January 27, 1756. His father, Leopold, was a court musician for the Archbishop of Salzburg and the family grew up in an atmosphere of musical instruction, practice and rehearsals. Leopold Mozart realized that his son was a musical genius when the boy was only three years old. At that early age he would climb up on the piano bench and play, by ear, difficult pieces that he had heard his father rehearsing with other musicians. Within a year or two he picked up a violin and played that, too, expertly. By the age of six, little Wolfgang had already composed minuets and other pieces of serious music, and his skill at the piano and violin was so brilliant that his father wanted to promote him around the world. Leopold set off with Wolfgang and his younger sister Nannerl on a tour of Europe, where the children played for important noblemen. While audiences admired the young prodigy and his sister, the Mozarts made little money form the tour, and Leopold's plans for financial success came to an end.

Between the ages of 10 and 17, Mozart composed music for special occasions at his school in Salzburg. At 12, he wrote his first opera – his favorite type of composition. Even at the age of 14, he already displayed a talent for musical drama.

Leopold hoped that the Archbishop of Salzburg would give his son a permanent job, but the Archbishop offered him no such position. Mozart went to live in Munich and then in Paris with his mother, who traveled with him to help keep his house. In Paris, they suffered in dreadful conditions of poverty. Unable to get any commissions for operas, Mozart turned to composing chamber music (music for small groups of instruments) – a far more marketable commodity. He also gave music lessons, which depressed him even further than his squalid living conditions; most of his pupils were children of aristocracy and had neither talent nor interest in music, studying only because it was fashionable.

Throughout his life, a suitable position was to elude Mozart. Returning to Salzburg at the age of 23, Mozart was given a job as a court organist, but this left little time to continue working on new compositions. In 1780, he was given a commission from the Munich Opera for a full-length work. He composed *Idomeneo* (1781), a story

based on ancient Greek heroes, following the popular tradition of serious opera at that time. The modest success of the opera encouraged the composer to leave Salzburg, which he found stifling, and to take up residence in Vienna, where he lived the remainder of his life.

During the next ten years, he composed an incredible number of pieces, including his most famous piano concerti, the remarkable last symphonies (numbers 35-41), ten of his most beautiful string quartets, the clarinet concerto, and his monumental (though unfinished) Mass in C minor. In 1782, he married Constanze Weber, who was also from a musical family. Both Mozart and Constanze were extravagant and disorganized, unfortunately making their financial situation even more precarious.

In the last few years of his life, Mozart collaborated with Lorenzo Da Ponte, who wrote the libretti for three of Mozart's most well-known operas. Despite the brief success of these operas – *Le nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro,* 1786), *Don Giovanni* (1787), and *Così fan tutte* (*Women are like that*, 1790) – Mozart was still unable to make a decent living or secure a steady job. The pressure of this bleak economic outlook contributed to Mozart's declining health and by the time he wrote his last opera, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute,* 1791), he was near physical and emotional collapse. Despite this, he undertook the composition of his profoundly moving Requiem Mass in D minor. This piece was Mozart's final project and it was left unfinished when he died in 1791. His student, Franz Süssmayr, finished it in 1792.

In December 1791, Mozart died at the age of 35 from what is believed to have been typhus. Since his wife was also sick at the time and unable to make proper funeral arrangements, he was buried in an unmarked grave in a pauper's cemetery.

Mozart's difficulty landing a permanent position was typical of composers and other musicians in Europe at the time. In the mid-18th century in Germany and Austria, the only secure jobs for musicians were as players or composers in the courts of important people, either nobility or clergy. In addition to playing in small orchestras in such households and composing music for special events, composers also hoped to get commissions from opera houses or orchestras for larger works. If, for example, an opera company wanted to put on a new work for a special holiday, the manager would commission a composer to write the piece, paying him an appropriate sum of money. This practice still continues today.

In the 18th century, there were—as there are now—more talented musicians than good-paying jobs, making the support of a patron essential for financial security. In Mozart's case, his sometimes stubborn, wayward disposition and fiscal irresponsibility prevented him from finding the success he craved. Mozart was not willing to cultivate the favor of the rich, preferring to concentrate his energies on his art. His fellow musicians were only too anxious to snap up the good-paying jobs, even if it meant resorting to various political intrigues. It is both tragic and ironic that one of the most beloved composers of all time died in poverty and unhappiness, without so much as a headstone to mark his resting place.

Mozart's compositions, though masterly in construction and profound in expression, can nonetheless be appreciated by people from all walks of life. His operas are notable for their complex portrayals of fully-rounded characters. Many of Mozart's works, in their amazing depth and variety, encompass the vast extent of the human condition and confirm his place among the world's greatest composers.

About the librettist

Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749-1838) is considered to be the greatest of Mozart's collaborators, having written the libretti for three of the composer's most celebrated operas: *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Così fan tutte*. Born Emmanuele Conegliano on March 10, 1749, he was the son of a Jewish tanner and leather dealer living in a city near Venice. In 1763 his father converted to Christianity in order to remarry, and the family adopted the name of Da Ponte.

Until the age of fourteen, Lorenzo had no formal education and was known as "lo spirito ignornate" (the witty ignoramus). He grew up speaking both Hebrew and Italian. As a teenager, he found in the attic the works of Metastasio, a celebrated Italian librettist of the eighteenth century, and the author of some twenty-seven *opera seria* (serious operas). Reading these works inspired the young Da Ponte to pursue a formal education; with his brother, he entered a seminary for five years. At the age of nineteen his studies were interrupted by a long illness. His patron, a Bishop, died, leaving him and his family impoverished.

A year later Da Ponte was offered a teaching position at another nearby seminary, and in 1770 he took holy orders and was later appointed Vice Rector. A visit to Venice the following year proved intoxicating for Da Ponte. He had a series of romantic adventures and involvements, including a friendship with the famous Casanova. It is rumored that the infamous playboy may have assisted Da Ponte in retouching the libretto of *Don Giovanni*. Da Ponte began to write and publish what were considered to be "radical" ideas similar to those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He was declared a subversive, forbidden to hold any teaching position in the Venetian Republic, and in 1779 was banished from the city for fifteen years because of his love affair with a married woman.

Leaving Venice, Da Ponte settled nearby on the Austrian border and began working as a translator and adaptor. He then traveled to Vienna on hearing a rumor that Emperor Joseph II was opening an Italian opera company. In Vienna he became associated with the court composer Antonio Salieri (1750-1825) and was soon appointed Poet to the Imperial Theaters in 1784. It was at this time that he began writing opera libretti, having his first great success in 1786. He met Mozart in 1783; their collaboration began with the adaptation of Pierre Beaumarchais' 1784 play, *The Marriage of Figaro*. Mozart, in a 1781 letter to his father, stresses the importance of the rapport between composer and librettist: "The best thing of all is when a

good composer, who understands the stage and is talented enough to make sound suggestions, meets an able poet."[1] In Da Ponte, Mozart seems to have found the perfect partner.

Like Don Giovanni himself, Da Ponte's numerous love affairs brought about his downfall, and he was banished from Vienna in 1791 as the result of another scandal. He fled to Trieste where he met and married the daughter of an English merchant, twenty years his junior. He later moved to London and there obtained the post of Poet to the Italian Opera. Mishandling of funds caused him to go into debt, and for a brief time he tried to make money back by working in an Italian bookshop in London. He ended up fleeing his creditors in 1805, leaving for New York with his wife and children to join her relatives there. The former illustrious librettist began his life in the United States as a grocer, but eventually became a teacher of Italian, and in time was revered as the Father of Italian Studies in the United States. In 1825, he helped found what was to become Columbia University. He died on August 17, 1838, at the age of ninety. One of his last moments of glory was the New York visit of Manuel Garcia and his Spanish opera company, who presented the New York premiere of *Don Giovanni* at Da Ponte's request.

[1] Quoted in Mitchell Cohen, *The Politics of Opera: A History from Monteverdi to Mozart* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 291.

Historical Background

Though Mozart struggled to find a permanent post throughout his adulthood, he did find a consistently receptive and financially supportive audience in Prague. In a January 1787 letter to a friend, Mozart relays the popularity of his 1786 opera, *The Marriage of Figaro*: "For here nothing is spoken of but - *Figaro*. Nothing is played, blown, sung, or whistled but - *Figaro*. No opera is attended like *Figaro*, eternally *Figaro*. Certainly a great honor for me…"[2]

Though *Figaro* premiered in Vienna, Austria, *Figaro* had its premiere in Prague in December 1786 at what is now the Estates Theater. The opera was enormously successful and audience members and noblepersons alike were eager to hear more of *Figaro* and of Mozart's other works. Mozart's January 1787 visit to Prague referenced above was for the purpose of attending two productions of *Figaro* in Prague: one as a listener and one as the conductor. Due to the success of these two performances of *Figaro* in 1787, opera impresario Pasquale Bondini, via the Estates Theater, commissioned *Don Giovanni*. Like *The Marriage of Figaro,* the libretto for *Don Giovanni* was to be written by Lorenzo Da Ponte.

Mozart received the commission for *Don Giovanni* in late January or early February of 1787. The premiere of *Don Giovanni* in Prague was in October of 1787, meaning that Mozart composed this opera in a span of about nine months. Because Mozart supported himself financially through accepting multiple projects while also teaching and performing, he was not able to devote himself exclusively to composing *Don Giovanni* during this period. Between his return to Vienna in February 1787 and his departure for Prague in October 1787, Mozart composed roughly twenty-five other pieces, including some of his most famous such as: *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (August 1787), his third string quartet in C major (April 1787) and his fourth string quartet in G minor (May 1787). Mozart's father, Leopold, also passed away in May 1787, making this period an emotionally difficult time for Mozart as well.

He arrived in Prague in early October to oversee *Don Giovanni*'s premiere and stayed until mid-November. The original premiere of *Don Giovanni* was planned for October 15th in celebration of the Archduchess Maria Theresa's visit. The composition period was so truncated that the original premiere was pushed back to October 29th because Mozart was not yet finished. *The Marriage of Figaro* was performed in place of *Don Giovanni* on October 15th to give Mozart more time.

[2] Quoted in Daniel Freeman, *Mozart in Prague* (Edina, MN: Calumet Editions, 2021), 109.

According to the Köchel Catalogue, a chronological catalogue of Mozart's works, Mozart completed *Don Giovanni* on October 28th, the night before its premiere. According to a review on November 3, 1787 in a German-language Prague newspaper, *Pragen Oberpostamts-Zeitung* (*Prague Post Office Newspaper*), the opera was well-received, despite the last-minute changes to the music and scenery:

> Herr Mozar[t] conducted in person; when he entered the orchestra he was received with threefold cheers, which again happened when he left it. The opera is, moreover, extremely difficult to perform, and every one admired the good performance given in spite of this after such a short period of study. Everybody, on the stage and in the orchestra, strained every nerve to thank Mozar[t] by rewarding him with a good performance.[3]

Following the Prague premiere, Mozart returned to Vienna where he conducted its premiere of *Don Giovanni* in May 1788.

Don Giovanni remains one of the most popular operas of all time and continues to be a mainstay in opera houses around the world. The combination of humor and drama paired with the timeless Don Juan legend allows for endless creativity in contemporary productions. Much like Mozart's blending of genres, Virginia Opera's production of *Don Giovanni* blends the old with the new.

[3] Quoted in Otto Erich Deutsch, *Mozart: A Documentary Biography* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 303.

The Don Juan legend

The opera *Don Giovanni* is based on the popular figure of Don Juan – the dashing, reckless seducer and adventurer—who has captured the interest and imagination of audiences and creatives for centuries. The character of a young, well-born man who defies all conventions for his personal pleasure may be found in mythology from many time periods. The earliest known incarnation developed in sixteenth-century Spain, where family honor and female virginity were held sacred. At that time there was a real-life seducer named the Conde de Villamediana (the Count of Villamediana) who defied society and earned an unsavory national reputation. In 1630, a Spanish monk published a moralistic play on the subject, calling the "hero" Don Juan Tenorio. The monk's name was Gabriel Téllez, but he published his play, *El burlador de Sevilla* (*The Playboy of Seville*) under the pen-name Tirso de Molina. Several of the incidents in this version of the story eventually found their way into Mozart and Da Ponte's opera.

The story of Don Juan made its way from Spain to Italy, where it was a favorite subject of the commedia dell'arte. The commedia was a form of improvisatory street theater in which familiar, stereotyped characters (such as Harlequin the clown, Pantalone the old man, etc.) were featured in comical plots. In the commedia performances of the Don Juan story, much emphasis was placed on the role of Don Juan's servant as comic foil, Arlecchino (Harlequin). Thus, what began in Spain as a moralistic play written by a monk was transformed by the Italians into a popular comedy.

An 18th century print featuring British actor, John Rich, as Arlequin. Courtesy of New York Public Library

When the commedia incarnation of the Don Juan legend traveled to Paris in 1659, it was seen by the great French dramatist Molière (1622-1673), who was fond of borrowing plots from the Italian comedies. In his version of the story, Molière, a noted actor himself, performed the role of Sganarelle, Don Juan's servant. Several other versions of the legend emerged in the European theater. The Italian playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) presented his play, *Don Giovanni Tenorio*, in 1735. In Vienna, Don Juan was the subject of a popular puppet show. In 1781, the great French composer Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) composed a ballet on the Don Juan theme (*Don Juan,* 1761). A handful of Italian operas on the subject appeared before Mozart's version premiered in 1787. That very same year, librettist Giovanni Bertati (1735-1815) and composer Giuseppe Gazzaniga (1743-1818) produced their *Don Giovanni Tenorio* in Venice. Da Ponte used this libretto as a basis for his own. It was not an uncommon practice for composers and librettists to borrow from each other in those days before the invention of the copyright.

The story of the libertine Don Juan has continued to fascinate musicians, writers, and film makers to our present day. The English Romantic poet Lord Byron (1788-1824) wrote an epic poem, *Don Juan* (1819-1824). A German poem by Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850) was the inspiration for Richard Strauss's (1864-1949) orchestral tone poem *Don Juan* of 1889. Composer and humorist Peter Schickele (1935-2024), better known as "PDQ Bach," composed and recorded a parody of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the 1960s entitled *The Stoned Guest*, which featured a character named Don Octave. In 1901, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), an Irish playwright who regarded Mozart's *Don Giovanni* as one of the greatest operas, produced his variation on the story with *Man and Superman* (1903), in which the third act (often omitted in modern performances due to its length) is subtitled "Don Juan in Hell" and utilizes music from Mozart's opera. In this interpretation Don Juan finds himself in hell where he is pursued by women and becomes the prey, rather than the predator, defying convention with the proposition that women are the stronger gender. Hollywood, too, has been lured by Don Juan's charms as a vehicle for such matinee idols as John Barrymore (*Don Juan*, 1926), Douglas Fairbanks, Jr, (*Private Life of Don Juan*, 1934) and Errol Flynn (*The Adventures of Don Juan*, 1948).

Ingmar Bergman (1918-2007) lent his interpretation of the story in *The Devil's Eye* (1960) and a rather unconventional treatment was produced by Roger Vadim (1928-2000) in 1973 with *Don Juan, or If Don Juan Were a Woman*, starring Brigitte Bardot. Though doomed to hell for eternity, the devil-may-care Don Juan has enjoyed quite a long life through the centuries as one of fiction's most popular and enduring creations.

Dramma giocoso

When Mozart and Da Ponte wrote *Don Giovanni* they had little or no idea of the great intellectual debate which their masterpiece would inspire over the next two centuries: Is the work to be interpreted as a dark, moralistic tragedy or as a more lighthearted, comic piece? Different conductors and directors have often chosen to emphasize one interpretation or the other. To understand exactly what was intended by the work's creators, one needs to know a bit about the traditions of opera and theater at the time.

According to eighteenth century theorists, the role of the theater was a didactic one: all drama had to instruct audiences to forsake evil and do good. In a typical tragedy the public was supposed to be moved to pity by seeing the hero of the drama overcome by the forces of evil. Both the main character and those surrounding him were drawn from the higher classes, and usually were such persons as kings, princes, nobles or mythological figures. In comedy, the focus was on the middle and lower classes – peasants, servants, commoners – where the baser human characteristics such as uncouthness, miserliness, incredulity and gluttony were held up to ridicule. By the late eighteenth century in operas like *Don Giovanni*, the different social classes were brought together onstage, with their various attributes and foibles contrasted for the edification and enjoyment of the public.

These theatrical traditions are reflected in the operas of the time. The tragedies are called opera seria (serious operas); these deal with important people and grand events. The plot exposition is achieved through recitative, or songs written in a declamatory manner to mimic speech. Recitatives often feature dialogue. There are different types of recitative common to opera seria: recitative secco (dry recitative), in which the words are sung with sparse accompaniment, and recitative accompagnato (accompanied recitative), in which the vocal lines are accompanied by instruments of the full orchestra. The latter, sometimes called dramatic recitative, is exemplified in *Don Giovanni* by the introduction to Donna Anna's aria "Or sai che l'onore." The arias in opera seria are quite formal, usually in an A-B-A structure in which the opening section (A) is followed by a contrasting section (B), then a repeat of A with vocal ornamentation displaying the singer's virtuosity. The vocal embellishments are known as coloratura, characterized by fast runs and leaps.

Italian comic opera is called opera buffa. The characters in opera buffa are classified into three different types: 1) parti serie: serious characters, usually higher

classes, who represent such virtuous qualities as courage, honesty, and faithfulness; 2) parti buffe: comic characters, usually the lower classes, who portray the opposite qualities such as inconstancy, cowardice, and servility; 3) mezzi caratteri: middle characters who borrow various characteristics from both of the other types. In opera buffa, the character differentiation is reflected in the musical language of the characters: fast, conversation-like vocal lines for comic characters (called "patter" when many words are sung as quickly as possible), and florid, vocal ornaments like coloratura for the serious ones. Nonetheless, all the vocal types can sing together, and an essential feature of eighteenth-century comic opera was the large ensemble at the end of each act, in which most of the major characters were featured together.

Certainly, *Don Giovanni* contains all the above-described elements of both genres. The libretto includes all the character types from comic opera: Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Don Ottavio, and the Commendatore are all parti serie; Leporello, Zerlina, and Masetto are all parti buffe, and Don Giovanni himself, who has both a serious and comic side and is equally at home with the nobles and the peasants, is a mezzo carattere. The musical score contains the formal arias of opera seria, but Mozart imbued the form with greater depth of characterization. Mozart and Da Ponte developed what has become known as the chain finale, a series of continuous musical sections at the end of each act during which the plot builds to a climax.

Mozart and Da Ponte had already blurred the distinction between opera seria and opera buffa in *The Marriage of Figaro*, which contains such contrasting arias as Bartolo's buffo patter song, "La vendetta" and the Countess's noble expression of her love, "Porgi amor." In *Don Giovanni* darker elements are more present; the plot goes beyond scheming servants and sexual politics to deal with murder, intimate partner violence, vengeance, and eternal damnation. For many years, most performances of the opera stress this darkness, ending the opera with the death of Giovanni and eliminating the epilogue, with its optimistic final sextet. This practice helped to reinforce the opinion of those who believed the opera to be a tragedy. The more current practice of restoring the original ending has re-shifted the balance back to what Mozart and Da Ponte had intended, a work in which the humorous elements are balanced with the serious ones. This is what makes *Don Giovanni* such a unique, individual masterpiece – the fact that is so filled with musical and dramatic variety, and, true to life, juxtaposes the comic with the tragic.