

Synopsis

Act I

Spain, mid-18th century. Leporello, servant to the nobleman Don Giovanni, keeps watch outside the Commendatore's home at night. Suddenly, the Commendatore's daughter, Donna Anna, comes running out, struggling with the masked Giovanni. The Commendatore appears and challenges Giovanni to a duel. Giovanni easily dispatches the older man, and he and Leporello escape. Anna returns with her fiancé, Don Ottavio, and asks him to avenge her father's death.

The next morning, Giovanni and Leporello encounter one of Giovanni's former conquests, Donna Elvira, who is devastated by his betrayal. Leporello explains to her that she is neither the first nor the last woman to fall victim to Giovanni and shows her his catalog with the name of every woman Giovanni has seduced.

In the country near Giovanni's home, peasants celebrate the marriage of Masetto and Zerlina. Giovanni flirts with the bride-to-be, telling her that she is destined for a better life. Elvira interrupts his seduction and urges Zerlina to flee. She also warns Anna, who is still unaware of the identity of her father's murderer and has asked Giovanni for help in finding the man, not to trust the Don. Giovanni, for his part, insists that Elvira is mad, and Anna and Ottavio wonder what to believe. As Giovanni leaves, Anna suddenly recognizes his voice as that of the murderer. Devastated but determined, she once more asks Ottavio to avenge her. He wonders how to restore her peace of mind. Giovanni, who has invited the entire wedding party to his home, looks forward to an evening of drinking and dancing.

Outside Giovanni's home, Zerlina asks Masetto to forgive her. Giovanni leads them both inside. Anna, Elvira, and Ottavio appear in masks and, unrecognized, enter the party.

In the ballroom, Giovanni dances with Zerlina, then tries to force himself on her in an adjoining room. Her cries for help prompt Giovanni to blame Leporello. Anna, Elvira, and Ottavio unmask themselves and, along with Zerlina and Masetto, accuse Giovanni. He is momentarily caught off guard but manages to slip away.

Act II

Having exchanged clothes with Giovanni, Leporello takes Elvira on a nighttime stroll, leaving his master free to serenade her maid. When Masetto arrives with a band of peasants to hunt down Giovanni, the disguised Don sends them off in various directions, then beats up Masetto. Zerlina finds her bruised fiancé and comforts him.

Later that night, Leporello—who Elvira still believes to be Giovanni—is surprised by Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina, and Masetto, who all denounce the supposed Don. Fearing for his life, Leporello reveals his identity and escapes. Ottavio declares that he will take revenge on Giovanni and asks the others to look after Anna. Elvira thinks about Giovanni, whom she still loves in spite of everything.

In a cemetery, Giovanni and Leporello find a statue of the Commendatore, which suddenly speaks, warning Giovanni that by morning he will laugh no longer. Giovanni forces the terrified Leporello to invite the statue to dinner. The statue accepts.

Once again, Ottavio asks Anna to marry him, but she replies that she will not do so until her father's death has been avenged.

Elvira arrives at Giovanni's home. She makes a last attempt to persuade him to change his life, but he laughs at her. The statue of the Commendatore appears and commands that Giovanni repent. He refuses and is consumed by flames. Left behind, Elvira, Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina, Masetto, and Leporello contemplate their futures and the fate of an immoral man.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Don Giovanni

Premiere: National Theater (now Estates Theater), Prague, 1787

Aided by his ingenious librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, Mozart approached his operatic retelling of the Don Juan myth from a point of view that is neither tragic nor entirely comic—but rather lighthearted, urbane, and ironic. Over the course of a night, a day, and another night, we follow the title character and his earthy comic sidekick, Leporello, through a series of encounters that begins with a fatal duel, moves back and forth between the humorous and the sentimental, and ends with the protagonist being dragged down to Hell by a vengeful, ghostly reincarnation of the Commendatore. Buoyed by Mozart's nuanced and insightful score, the opera still rings with psychological truth after more than two centuries after its premiere.

The Creators

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) was the son of a Salzburg court musician and composer, Leopold, who was also his principal teacher and exhibited him as a musical prodigy throughout Europe. His achievements in opera, in terms of beauty, vocal challenge, and dramatic insight, remain unsurpassed, and his seven mature works of the genre are pillars of the repertory. The extraordinary Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749–1838) led an adventurous life in Venice and Vienna. He converted from Judaism as a youth and joined the Catholic Church, where he took Holy Orders. He supplied libretti for the prominent composers of his time, including Antonio Salieri, and collaborated with Mozart on *Così fan tutte*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni*. Da Ponte migrated to America and eventually settled in New York, where he served as the first professor of Italian at Columbia College (now University) and was instrumental in developing an audience for Italian opera. The myth of Don Juan appears to have first made it into print in the play *El Burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de Piedra* (*The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*, 1630) by the versatile Spanish author and priest Tirso de Molina (1579–1648).

The Setting

The city of Seville in southern Spain, where the legend of Don Juan plays out, was already famous in Mozart's time as a mythical world of winding streets, hot-blooded young men, and exotically beautiful women sequestered behind latticed windows, or "jalousies" (which gave us our English word "jealousy"). The Met's current production places the action in an unnamed Spanish city in the mid-18th century.

The Music

Mozart's score for this opera teems with the elegance and grace that marks his entire output, which is already evident in the ravishing overture. This musical refinement is combined with extraordinary dramatic expression. Don Giovanni's famous Act I aria "Fin ch'han dal vino" (the so-called "Champagne Aria") is exhilarating but almost vulgar in its graphic depiction of the character's sexual obsession. The ineffectual loveliness of the tenor Don Ottavio, on the other hand, is depicted in the long, languid lines of the character's two ravishing solos, "Dalla sua pace" (Act I) and "Il mio tesoro" (Act II). Donna Anna's nobility—and perhaps her intransigence—are well reflected in her major arias, "Or sai chi l'onore" in Act I and "Non mi dir" in Act II. The buffoonish (yet astute) Leporello is funny throughout the opera, but his Act I aria "Madamina, il catalogo è questo" (the "Catalog Aria") is also a towering example of the melding of words and music. Donna Elvira's Act II aria, "Mi tradi," contains extravagant leaps and runs that express the emotions of a person barely holding on to her mental stability.

Met History

Don Giovanni appeared at the Met in 1883 during the company's first season. Victor Maurel, Verdi's original Falstaff, portrayed the title character in several performances during the 1890s, and in 1908, Gustav Mahler conducted an impressive cast, including the legendary Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin as Leporello. Mahler even played the harpsichord recitative accompaniment himself on a modified piano. A new Joseph Urban–designed production premiered in 1929, conducted by Tullio Serafin and featuring the Italian bass Ezio Pinza, as the title Don, in what would become his most celebrated role. Cesare Siepi took over for the subsequent generation. The great Austrian conductor Karl Böhm made his company debut with this opera in 1957. Great interpreters of the title role have included Sherrill Milnes, James Morris, Ruggero Raimondi, Dmitri Hvorostovsky, Ferruccio Furlanetto, and Samuel Ramey, the last two alternating with each other in the role of Leporello. Many great sopranos have appeared as Donna Anna: Rosa Ponselle, Zinka Milanov, Dame Joan Sutherland, Leontyne Price, Renée Fleming, and Eleanor Steber, who had previously made her mark as Donna Elvira. The opera has also showcased such diverse singers as Pilar Lorengar (Met debut, 1966), Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Karita Mattila, and Susan Graham (Elvira); Carol Vaness (Elvira and Anna); Ljuba Welitsch (Anna); Anna Netrebko (Anna and Zerlina); Kathleen Battle, Roberta Peters, Teresa Stratas, Frederica von Stade, Dawn Upshaw, and Bidu Sayão (Zerlina); Sir Bryn Terfel (Giovanni and Leporello); René Pape and Paul Plishka (Leporello); and Nicolai Gedda, Beniamino Gigli, and Jan Peerce (Ottavio). Michael Grandage's production premiered in October 2011, with Fabio Luisi conducting Barbara Frittoli, Marina Rebeka, Ramón Vargas, Luca Pisaroni, and Peter Mattei in the title role.

Program Note

“Mozart had experienced how much the Bohemians appreciated his music and how well they executed it,” wrote one of Mozart’s friends after the composer’s death. “This he often mentioned to his acquaintances in Prague, where a hero-worshipping, responsive public and real friends carried him, so to speak, on their shoulders.” Mozart must have loved his time in Prague, where he finally received the recognition he badly wanted and felt he deserved but never quite achieved in the more staid, aristocratic Vienna. His love affair with the Bohemian city began in January 1787, a month or so after a production of his *Le Nozze di Figaro*—which had premiered to only modest success in Vienna earlier in 1786—had taken Prague by storm. The opera orchestra and some wealthy admirers of the work paid for Mozart to visit, and he was amazed at what he found:

I was very delighted to look upon all these people leaping about in sheer delight to the music of my *Figaro*, adapted for noisy contra-dances and waltzes; for here nothing is discussed but *Figaro*; nothing is played, blown, sung, or whistled but *Figaro*; no opera is succeeding but *Figaro* and eternally *Figaro*; certainly a great honor for me.

Mozart brought with him on his visit the newly completed Symphony No. 38, which he had written in the city’s honor, and this too met with tremendous enthusiasm from the public and enjoyed repeated performances. Unfortunately, he was able to soak up the adoration for less than a month before returning to Vienna, but he left with a commission in hand for another opera—this time one that would have its premiere in Prague. The new opera was to become *Don Giovanni*.

Myths and legends regarding the composition of *Don Giovanni* abound, chief among them that the music was written in an impossibly short amount of time in the few weeks leading up to its October 1787 premiere. And as with most such tales, there is a kernel of truth in the story. Mozart—always known for his frenzied work rate—wrote much of the recitative as well as some of the comical scenes in the weeks preceding the premiere. Most amazing—and most oft-referenced—is that he wrote the overture truly at the last moment, either the day before or the day of the opening, so that the instrumental parts were barely able to be copied in time. But these were the items that Mozart always saved for last when composing operas; the major arias and ensemble numbers had been in the works for months, since shortly after his return to Vienna in February. Mozart accomplished many seemingly miraculous feats, but even he could not have written, rehearsed, and produced a work such as *Don Giovanni* in three weeks’ time. It is impressive enough that he was able to write it in less than a year, despite also turning out three quintets, a sonata, and the divertimentos *Ein Musikalischer Spass* (*A Musical Joke*) and the famous *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*—not to mention dealing with the news of his father’s death—during the same span.

Mozart did the sensible thing and approached Lorenzo Da Ponte, the librettist with whom he had collaborated to such great success on *Le Nozze di Figaro*, as a partner for *Don Giovanni*. And though many scholars have argued that Da Ponte's libretto for *Don Giovanni* is dramatically a bit of a mess, only saved by Mozart's transcendent music, it is important to acknowledge that the Italian playwright was working with a very difficult and complex subject. The Don Juan myth had been the subject of numerous literary, dramatic, musical, philosophical, and popular interpretations, each with its own angle and varying details. To tackle such a well-known subject at significant length (enough to support a full-length opera), sustain dramatic tension, and provide a text that lends itself to music is no mean feat. In its knitting together of so many different ideas and influences, it is true that the *Don Giovanni* libretto does not have the surgical precision and seamless construction of Da Ponte's text for *Figaro*. But in sacrificing those attributes, it allows greater freedom. It offers more opportunity for the music to be the decisive voice, making the connections and filling in the gaps left by the text—an opportunity Mozart seized to the fullest.

By this time in his life, the composer had completely left all of his contemporaries and his younger self behind and was turning out masterpiece after masterpiece as if he were incapable of anything else—and perhaps he was. The music of *Don Giovanni* is a wonder, at once both an apotheosis of 18th-century Italianate opera and a startling premonition of Romanticism, Wagnerian music drama, and even the psychological dramas of the 20th century. Mozart's most forward-looking opera, *Don Giovanni* was unsurprisingly the work most appreciated by the composers of the next century. As the great critic Harold Schonberg wrote, "It is the most Romantic of Mozart's operas, just as it is the most serious, the most powerful, and the most otherworldly. . . . Mozart was constantly misunderstood by the 19th century. He was called the Raphael of music, and was considered an elegant, dainty rococo composer who just happened to have composed *Don Giovanni*." Though operagoers, musicians, and scholars will never tire of debating which of Mozart's operas are the "greatest," this is certainly one of his most widely loved, even today.

But if *Don Giovanni* is among Mozart's most enduring and popular operas, it is also one of his most ambiguous and difficult to interpret. In his own catalog, Mozart labeled the work an "opera buffa," or "comic opera." But it is difficult to accept that this tale of obsessive promiscuity, infidelity, sexual assault, murder, and the dragging of the protagonist into the yawning mouth of Hell is purely a light-hearted, humorous work. Yet there are moments of genuine comedy, and since the impetus for its composition was a commission specifically for a follow-up to *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Mozart was surely sensitive to the expectation of levity. Da Ponte called *Don Giovanni* a "dramma giocoso" (a work that combines serious roles with comic ones). This seems closer to the mark, but the fact that

the distinction is based on the combination of serious and comic *roles* brings up the most important reason for the opera's ambiguity. The tone of *Don Giovanni* is wholly dependent on the production and the singers' interpretations of their parts. The title character can be played as a debonair, confident "bad boy" who seduces his women and the audience into ignoring his dark side. Or he can be played as a vile and violent criminal who rapes and kills to get what he wants. Likewise, Donna Elvira can be a tragic and pitiable shell of a woman, driven mad as she's strung along by the cruel don, or she can be a humorous caricature, her outbursts made so broad and outsized that they become ridiculous. And so on. For this reason, perhaps more than any other opera, *Don Giovanni* is different with each production. No matter how many times we see it, we never really "know" it, and so it draws us back again and again.

—Jay Goodwin

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