



Don Giovanni Mozart

An odd opera

Don Giovanni is the odd man out amongst Mozart's operas. Instead of his normal distressed lovers, Mozart gives us a hero (Don Giovanni) who behaves appallingly for three solid hours before tumbling into Hell in the last act. And, although large parts of the opera are comic, there is a pounding demonic energy in the music that drives the story along; many people think it the most frightening opera in the repertory.

A hair raising opera

In 1787 sixteen year old Wenzel Tomaschek was taken to *Don Giovanni* by his older brother. It was so cold that they sat on the benches wrapped in their coats and, as the music filled the theatre, Wenzel seemed to go into a trance. "I sat there like a dreamer," he wrote, "hardly daring to breathe. My interest in the opera grew with each moment and, during the scene where the ghost of the Commendatore appeared, my hair stood on end with fright. On the way home I thanked my brother with tears in my eyes and left him without saying a word."

Wenzel was obviously a romantic teenager but even hard headed people like George Bernard Shaw have found *Don Giovanni* disturbing. "The music," Shaw said, "sounds like ghostly echoes from another world... The roots of my hair stirred; and I recoiled as from the actual presence of Hell."

A radical opera

It is less easy nowadays to get a modern audience's hair to stand on end, but performances by the ENO of Mozart's opera usually manage to do so, though normally with indignation rather than fright. ENO has a long tradition of controversial performances of the opera. It started in the 1930s when the company put it on with a couple of dustbins on stage. That was considered very daring pre-war. Then, when the company moved to their new theatre (the London Coliseum) in the 1960s, it opened with *Don Giovanni* – and nearly closed the next week: it was a terrible production and nobody wanted to buy tickets for it. Since then ENO has put on a swashbuckling *Don Giovanni*, a gothic *Don Giovanni*, and a strange production by Jonathan Miller in which the Don was pushed into Hell by the women he'd deserted - all prodding him with prop babies.

The production currently running at the Coliseum has been updated to the present time; the Don pads round discos, takes drugs, rapes, murders and generally qualifies himself for Hell in the closing moments of the opera. However Mozart's music and plot is unchanged and it is clear that the director, Bieito, expects you to know about the ordinary *Don Giovanni* before you tackle his radical re-telling of the story.

The characters

The opera is dominated by three basses, **Don Giovanni** himself (a Spanish nobleman), his servant **Leporello** and the **Commendatore**, an elderly Spanish General. The opera starts with the Don's attempted rape of the Commendatore's daughter **Donna Anna** (soprano) and the murder of the old man himself; Donna Anna's fiancée, **Don Ottavio** (tenor), arrives just too late to be of any use. The Commendatore, Anna and Ottavio are extremely serious people but Mozart lightens the plot by bringing in three comic characters: **Donna Elvira** (soprano),

dumped by Giovanni and on his trail, and two peasants, **Zerlina** (mezzo soprano) and her fiancée **Masetto** (bass).

Act 1

The opera starts outside a house in Seville. Leporello, Don Giovanni's servant, is pacing up and down in the cold, waiting for his master, and grumbling about his pay. He tells us that Don Giovanni is inside at this very moment with a woman, though what he *doesn't* tell us is that the Don has forced an entry into the palace of the Commendatore and is attempting to rape his daughter, Donna Anna.

Murder

A commotion from the wings warns us that something has gone wrong and, as Leporello hides, Don Giovanni enters, disguised and severely hampered by Donna Anna who is trying to find out who her attacker is. Leporello remarks bitterly at the latest mess his master has got himself into as Giovanni and Anna tussle on stage. They are interrupted by the Commendatore, outraged at the insult to his daughter. He challenges Don Giovanni to a duel, the Don contemptuously agrees and kills the old man almost immediately. He and Leporello exit swiftly.

A Vow

Meanwhile Donna Anna has fainted and is only roused by the entrance of the servants and her fiancée, Don Ottavio (tenor). The young man is much more concerned about Anna than the corpse, but he agrees to avenge her father. And that rather sums him up. Both Don Ottavio and Donna Anna are noble, conservative characters. For them honour comes before love but, although Anna spends the opera trying to avenge her father's death, Ottavio never quite has his mind on the job. The only thing he really thinks about is her.

Another girl

As the corpse is borne into the house, Don Giovanni and Leporello creep back. Leporello scolds his master, but he is soon shut up. You'll notice *this* pattern for the rest of the opera as well. Leporello is always grumbling about the Don but, actually, he rather admires him. Don Giovanni suddenly sniffs the air, "surely," he says, "there's a woman nearby..." He and Leporello hide in the shadows as Donna Elvira enters.

Donna Elvira is less grand than Donna Anna and her music has a comic swing to it as she tells us that she's travelled (alone) to Seville to find her seducer, one Don Giovanni. The Don doesn't recognise her and sidles up, only to back off quickly when he sees her face. He tells Leporello to tell her exactly the sort of man he is, and exits.

An impressive record

This is the cue for Leporello to pull out his book, a hand written list of all the women Don Giovanni has seduced. Leporello reels them off, 640 girls in Italy, 100 in France, only 91 in Turkey but, in prudish Spain, 1,003. The tune is cheerful until Leporello begins to describe Giovanni's techniques of seduction, then the mood gets darker. We realise that there is something sinister about the Don and Donna Elvira is frankly appalled. She is a forthright Spanish woman and exits, swearing vengeance.

A Wedding

The sound of Merry Peasants fills the air as a wedding party enters. Don Giovanni returns, delighted by all the pretty girls, moves in on the bride, Zerlina. He orders Leporello to lead the peasants (and the bridegroom Masetto) to his palace for a wedding feast. Masetto furiously objects, but realises there is no point in arguing with an armed nobleman.

Elvira to the rescue

Left alone with Zerlina, Giovanni flatters her into thinking he's proposing marriage. Zerlina doesn't quite know what to think: she is overwhelmed by the physical presence of Giovanni, worried about Masetto, and tempted by the palace. However Elvira busts on to the stage and removes Zerlina from danger. Giovanni is rather thrown by this and doesn't get off the stage quickly enough to avoid Ottavio and Anna (who now enter). "This is all I need..." he mutters and, before he knows quite what is happening, he finds he's offered to help Anna track down

the Commendatore's killer. Elvira reappears and, seeing him kissing the hand of Donna Anna, assumes the worst. She warns the lovers of Giovanni's treachery, the Don quickly tells them that Elvira is mad – and Anna and Ottavio don't know what to think.

The murderer

Elvira eventually exits and Giovanni follows with a farewell bow to Donna Anna. She exclaims in horror, his voice and manner has triggered something in her memory and she turns to Ottavio, convinced she has discovered the murderer of her father. Her fears spill out in an accompanied recitative, in which she relives the terror of the previous night, and wound up by a blazing aria. It is fiendishly difficult to sing, going up to top A and staying there but (in spite of the A's) Ottavio remains hesitant, Don Giovanni is after all a nobleman.

The scene switches to the Don and Leporello. Leporello tells his master that the party for the peasants is going well and Giovanni rattles off a song that is always called the 'champagne' aria. Actually he doesn't mention champagne at all, he's just looking forward to the wine, girls and dancing ahead and dashes off to the party as Masetto and Zerlina enter. Masetto is furious with Zerlina for deserting him on their wedding day, Zerlina calms him down, and the pair of them are hustled off to the party by Don Giovanni (who returns just in time to annoy Masetto all over again).

The Three Maskers

The stage darkens and three masked figures enter. Leporello gives them an invitation to the party as well, which they gravely accept. Left alone on stage they sing a trio calling on Heaven to help them. The strings in the pit go silent, the singers are accompanied solely by the wind section and, for a moment, all the music in the theatre is dependent on human lungs and breath control. The effect is serene, and rather eerie. Two of the maskers are stately sopranos, the other is a polite tenor, and we are in no doubt as to who they are as we follow them to the party.

The Party

Three quite different dances are going on and, as the dancers move round the stage, the music zooms in on small groups. Masetto won't dance, Giovanni sidles up to Zerlina and, as they slip away, Leporello hastily follows. Sure enough, Zerlina suddenly screams: Giovanni is clearly trying to rape her. There is general confusion. Masetto and Ottavio batter down a door and Giovanni appears, kicking Leporello in front of him and trying to make out that *he* is the guilty man... Nobody believes him and everybody, noblemen and peasants together, denounce the Don. Only Leporello stands back. He says nothing will frighten his master and indeed Giovanni remains deeply unimpressed, even when he's threatened with the vengeance of Heaven (a threat Heaven immediately backs up with a thunderstorm). The final chords of Act 1 find him isolated, defiant, and free.

Act 2

The act starts abruptly with a couple of chords and a furious Leporello, determined to leave Giovanni's service for ever. However four gold coins sort out the problem and Leporello is immediately caught up in another of Giovanni's intrigues.

A Serenade

The Don has fallen in love with Donna Elvira's maid but, as the lower classes in Seville have become mysteriously suspicious of noblemen, he suggests that he and Leporello swap clothes. They do so as Donna Elvira appears at the window of her room; Leporello, now looking like Giovanni, stands below and pretends to sing to her. Actually it is the Don, singing from the shadows, but Elvira is fooled and (thinking he is penitent) she agrees to come down. Giovanni orders Leporello to take her away. With the coast clear Giovanni sings a serenade to Elvira's maid but, before he can get down to business, he is interrupted by Masetto and a band of peasants. They are bent on finding the Don and killing him and Giovanni (still disguised) offers to help. He sends the peasants off to look for the seducer, keeps Masetto back – and beats him up.

A Muddle

Meanwhile Leporello is wishing he could get rid of Elvira, they stumble into "a dark place" where Leporello finds a secret door and tries to sneak off – only to bump into Don Ottavio and Donna Anna. Anna and Ottavio do not notice Leporello immediately but Masetto and Zerlina rush in (it's never explained how they got there), the lights go up, and everybody sees 'Don Giovanni'. They're all furious with him and things get so dangerous that Leporello removes his disguise; this doesn't really help as Masetto thinks it was he who beat him up and of course Elvira is not pleased to discover she's been walking round town with a servant. Donna Anna can not cope and leaves the stage, while Leporello slips away.

Two arias

Oddly enough the incident convinces Ottavio that there *is* something underhand about Giovanni and he tells the others that he will carry out his vow of vengeance. Characteristically his mind flits immediately back to Donna Anna and he asks the others to go and comfort her while he sings an aria. Elvira too sings an aria. She is distressed to find that, though Giovanni has consistently betrayed her, she still loves and pities him.

The graveyard

The scene changes to a cemetery. A demonic laugh rings out; Don Giovanni has had a splendid evening chasing girls and is in a ferociously good mood. Leporello climbs over the wall and is not amused to find his master there. Giovanni tells him that one of the girls he's been chatting up was a friend of Leporello's. Leporello is outraged, "What if that had been my wife!?" he cries. "Better still!" roars the Don, and a voice cuts through the gloom, "Your laughter will be over by dawn!" Both men are unnerved, but Giovanni looks round for the intruder. He notices a monumental statue of the Commendatore and tells Leporello to read the inscription on the statue. It says, "On the Wicked Man who brought about my death I await my vengeance." "The old fool!" cries Giovanni, "Leporello invite him to supper". There is a dangerous glitter in his eye as he says this and Leporello, terrified by the graves and the moonlight, stumbles out an invitation. To his horror the statue nods acceptance. Don Giovanni refuses to be frightened and plants himself in front of the monument. "Will you come to supper? Speak!" he cries, and the statue intones "Yes!" Leporello is on the verge of collapse but the Don laughs, "Well we'd better go home to prepare it," he says.

A Noble Moment

The next scene is a bridge between the cemetery and Don Giovanni's last supper. Don Ottavio has asked Donna Anna to marry him right now, this minute. Of course it is far too soon, a bare 24 hours after her father's death, but Mozart was probably not expecting us to clock up the hours. Anna refuses, duty demands she avenge her father *and* mourn him properly. Ottavio is disappointed, but he's rewarded by an aria in which she assures him of her love.

Supper

And so, on to the supper. Although the music as the Don sits down to eat is light hearted, the full orchestra is sounding from the pit – a sure indication that the opera is building up to its climax. The actual menu of the supper is plotted carefully in the libretto, soup, main dish, wine; Leporello is extremely hungry and steals some pheasant as Giovanni listens to his own personal supper band.

Elvira enters in great distress, she instinctively feels that Giovanni is on the verge of a crisis and begs him to change his life. The Don shouts her down and, as she leaves, she screams with horror. Leporello is ordered to see what's frightened her, he looks into the wings and returns in a state of collapse. "The white man! The stone man!" he cries, "can't you hear him?" And he thumps the table with the rhythm of the stone man's steps. The next minute a savage chord announces the appearance of a statue, the Commendatore himself is in the room. Don Giovanni rises magnificently to the occasion and orders another supper - but Leporello has dived under the table.

An Invitation

The Commendatore waves supper aside; living, as he does, on Heavenly food, he needs no earthly sustenance. He has come instead to invite Don Giovanni to supper with him. In Heaven clearly. "He can't come," says Leporello quickly, but Giovanni accepts. You can say

anything you like about the Don, but you can't fault his courage. He gives the Commendatore his hand and cries out at the coldness of the stone. "Repent!" says the Commendatore, "No!" thunders the Don, "Repent!" "No!" "There is no more time..." says the statue, and leaves. Don Giovanni writhes as the agony of Hell grips him, a chorus of demons taunts him, the earth opens up and down he goes (usually through a trap door) surrounded by red fire.

This is probably the most powerful scene Mozart ever wrote. Three trombones supplement the normal orchestra (their sound was always associated with the supernatural in the 18th century) and the music swings from crescendo to pianissimo and back.

Wrapping it Up

The entrance of all the other characters, to a bright breezy tune, is a huge relief and us all to normality. They have decided at last to bring Don Giovanni to justice, but Leporello comes up from under his table to tell them the Don has already been punished. "Don't ask where he's gone!" he adds ominously. Everybody is impressed, but scarcely surprised, by the news, and they instantly pick up their lives again. Anna and Ottavio agree to marry (after the formal year of mourning has passed), Elvira decides to enter a convent, Leporello realises he needs a new master, while Zerlina and Masetto go home for supper. Before they leave however, they come forward to point out the Impressive Moral: "As the old song says, wicked men go to Hell..."

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