

Friday 17 June 2016

Don Giovanni

(original Prague version, 1787)

Dramma giocosa in two acts

Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte (1749 - 1838)

Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Cast

Don Giovanni	Jacques Imbrailo (baritone)
Leporello	David Soar (bass-baritone)
Donna Elvira	Helen Sherman (mezzo-soprano)
Donna Anna	Ana Maria Labin (soprano)
Don Ottavio	Stuart Jackson (tenor)
Zerlina	Ellie Laugharne (soprano)
Masetto	Bradley Travis (bass-baritone)
Il Commendatore	David Shipley (bass)

Philharmonia Chorus

The Mozartists (leader, **Matthew Truscott**)

Ian Page (conductor)

Andrew Mellor (recording engineer and producer)

Synopsis

Act One

Leporello is standing guard outside Donna Anna's window when his master, Don Giovanni, suddenly appears, hotly pursued by Donna Anna. They are quickly followed by Anna's father, the Commendatore, who challenges the Don to a duel; in the ensuing fight the Commendatore is killed, and Don Giovanni and Leporello escape. Anna now returns with her betrothed, Don Ottavio, and beseeches him to exact revenge on the unknown murderer.

Away from the scene of the crime, Don Giovanni and Leporello encounter another distressed young woman who tells how she has been abandoned by her lover. Don Giovanni hopes to take advantage of her vulnerability, but soon realises that he himself is the traitor in question. Beating a hasty retreat, he leaves Leporello to pacify Donna Elvira.

Don Giovanni and Leporello come across a group of peasants who are celebrating the impending marriage of Zerlina to Masetto. Setting his sights on Zerlina, the Don announces that he will host the festivities and asks Leporello to escort the peasants to his palace. Left alone with Zerlina, Don Giovanni immediately attempts to seduce her, and she is only saved by the sudden arrival of Donna Elvira.

Don Giovanni now runs into Donna Anna and Don Ottavio, who ask for his support in their quest to avenge Anna's honour and the Commendatore's death. The Don readily agrees but is once more interrupted by the arrival of Elvira, who again denounces him as a traitor. Flustered, Don Giovanni tells Anna and Ottavio that there is no truth in her words but, as Don Giovanni leaves, Anna suddenly recognises him as the man who attempted to seduce her.

In high spirits, Don Giovanni announces to Leporello that they will throw a party at which he will seduce at least ten young women. Elvira, Anna and Ottavio arrive outside the palace disguised as masqueraders and are promptly invited in to join the celebrations. Hearing Zerlina's scream for help, they burst in on Don Giovanni who – although he tries to pin the blame on Leporello – is caught red-handed. In the chaos that follows, he escapes.

Act Two

Don Giovanni and Leporello arrive at Donna Elvira's lodgings, where the Don hopes to seduce her chamber maid. Planning to lure Elvira away from the scene, Don Giovanni swaps clothes with his servant and – hiding behind the disguised Leporello – declares his penitence and enduring love. Elvira quickly forgives Don Giovanni his past transgressions and departs with the disguised Leporello, leaving Don Giovanni alone to attempt his next seduction. He serenades Elvira's maid, but he has barely finished when he is interrupted by a vengeful Masetto leading a group of peasants. Posing as his servant, Don Giovanni sends the peasants off in pursuit of Leporello and Elvira before violently beating Masetto and running away. Zerlina arrives and comforts Masetto, who basks in her renewed attention.

Leporello is discovered by Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina and Masetto, who all mistake him for Don Giovanni. To their consternation, Elvira appears and leaps to his defence, and the confusion is only exacerbated when the terrified Leporello reveals that he and his master have been posing as each other.

Having escaped their pursuers, Don Giovanni and Leporello meet in a graveyard next to a statue of the Commendatore. The Don amuses himself by goading Leporello, but their bickering is abruptly curtailed when they hear the voice of the Commendatore. The statue requests that they leave the dead to rest, but instead the swaggering Don invites him to dinner later that evening. Elsewhere, Ottavio asks Anna to marry him the next day, but to his chagrin she tells him that she is not yet ready.

Leporello serves Don Giovanni's dinner while musicians play tunes from popular operas of the day. Suddenly Elvira arrives and tries one more time to convince Don Giovanni to change his ways. Having aroused only his contempt she makes to leave, but upon reaching the door she screams and rushes through another exit. Leporello is sent to investigate and returns, quaking, to announce that the statue has indeed come to dinner. Confronting Don Giovanni, the statue asks him whether he will repent of his sins, but the Don repeatedly refuses to do so and is finally dragged screaming down to Hell.

Leporello, who has been hiding under the table, is now joined by the rest of the characters, who listen as he tells them of Don Giovanni's demise. Satisfied that their work is done, they discuss their plans for the future and pronounce that Don Giovanni has indeed received punishment to fit his crimes.

Don Giovanni: an introduction by Richard Wigmore

For Charles Gounod, writing a century after the opera's première, *Don Giovanni* was "that unequalled and immortal masterpiece, that apogee of lyrical drama". For E. T. A. Hoffmann, composer and weaver of fantastic tales who saw in Mozart's music "an intimation of infinity", it was, simply, "the opera of all operas". In his 1813 short story, *Don Juan, a Fantastic Happening which befell a Travelling Enthusiast*, Hoffmann proceeded to transform Mozart and Da Ponte's amoral serial seducer into a Faustian-Promethean hero-rebel, forever striving for an unattainable ideal of womanhood. Other writers added their own glosses as the opera Mozart dubbed a *dramma giocoso* morphed into a heroic tragedy. For Charles Baudelaire, Mozart's Don became the mesmeric incarnation of satanic evil, while for the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard he was an abstract embodiment of the power and energy of sexual desire itself: "The reflex of his gigantic passion beautifies and develops its object, who flushes in enhanced beauty by its reflection."

Like two other works that begin in a sombre, unquiet D minor – the Piano Concerto, K.466, and the unfinished Requiem – *Don Giovanni* perfectly fulfilled the nineteenth century's need for a Romantic, "demonic" (Hoffmann's word), even tragic Mozart. Significantly, it was usually performed without its resolving final ensemble. Yet while Mozart's music added layers of complexity and ambivalence unimagined by Da Ponte, what librettist and composer conceived was an essentially comic follow-up to their previous *dramma giocoso*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, a sensation in Prague in the early months of 1787. Several of the Prague singers were common to both operas: Luigi Bassi, the Count in *Figaro*, took the title role in the new opera, in the process swapping one philandering aristocrat for another, far more dangerous one. Lower down the social scale, Felice Ponziani, with his flair for comic patter, moved naturally from Figaro to Leporello, while his Susanna, Caterina Bondini (wife of the impresario who commissioned *Don Giovanni*, and a Prague favourite), sang the role of Zerlina.

In his notoriously self-aggrandising *Memoirs* Da Ponte claimed that it was he who suggested the opera's subject as peculiarly suited to Mozart's genius. True to form, though he is coy about mentioning his indebtedness to Giovanni Bertati's libretto for Gazzaniga's one-act comedy *Don Giovanni Tenorio*, recently premièred in Venice. Bertati's text in turn draws on at least two plays – on a popular story whose origins probably lie in medieval myth: Tirso de Molina's *El burlador de Sevilla y Convidado de piedra* ('The Seville trickster, or the stone guest', 1630), and Molière's *Dom Juan* of 1665. The Prague public expected, and got, many of the ingredients that had made *Figaro* such a smash hit in the Bohemian capital. Like the earlier opera, *Don Giovanni* revolves around the tensions of class, sex and aristocratic abuse of power. Ensembles and propulsive 'chain' finales, where one section tumbles into the next in a logical crescendo of tension and/or confusion, remain crucial, though the structure, especially in Act

Two, is more loosely episodic than *Figaro*'s. The rich and colourful orchestration pays tribute to the prowess of the Prague players. As in *Figaro*, Mozart relished abundant opportunities for *buffo* clowning. In *Don Giovanni*, though, the roles are more sharply divided between the serious (Donna Anna, her betrothed, Don Ottavio, and her father, the Commendatore) and the comic (Leporello, Zerlina and Masetto), with the chameleon Don and the scorned but devoted Donna Elvira belonging to what the eighteenth century termed *mezzo carattere*, or 'mixed type'.

Premièred on 29 October 1787, possibly with Da Ponte's friend Casanova as the aptest of spectators in the audience (reports of the rake's presence are unconfirmed), *Don Giovanni* duly replicated *Figaro*'s triumph. "Connoisseurs and musicians declare that nothing like this has ever been performed in Prague," reported the *Prager Oberpostamtszeitung*. Mozart himself enthused to a friend that "it was received with the greatest applause". Mirroring the reception of *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* was a more qualified success when it was staged in Vienna in May 1788, with various revisions and additions, including a substitute aria for Don Ottavio ("Dalla sua pace", replacing the elaborate "Il mio tesoro") and a new *scena* in Act Two for Donna Elvira. (Tonight's performance follows the original Prague version.) While the opera ran for a respectable twelve performances, with three more in the autumn, public reaction seems to have been ambivalent. The opera-loving Countess de la Lippe deemed "the music learned, little suited to the voice", a verdict echoed by Emperor Joseph II ("Mozart's music is certainly too difficult to be sung") even before he had heard the opera. If Da Ponte's unreliable *Memoirs* can be trusted here, the Emperor later pronounced the opera "divine, perhaps even finer than *Figaro*, but it is not food for the Viennese", to which Mozart all-too-neatly retorted "Let us give them time to chew it!"

Since the appearance of the quartets dedicated to Haydn in 1785, Mozart had begun to acquire a reputation as a 'difficult' composer in the imperial capital. While *Don Giovanni* remained perennially popular in Prague, many Viennese opera-goers were evidently fazed by the sheer textural and harmonic richness of the work, and its extreme juxtapositions – handled with dazzling virtuosity – of comedy and high seriousness, buffoonery and tragedy. The overture, beginning with what the critic Ernest Newman a century ago called "the most magically evocative chord in the history of music" (a terrifying statement of D minor, in scoring that uncannily mingles density and acerbic brilliance), is closely bound to the action of the opera. The slow introduction, with its ominous, chromatically falling bass, swirling violins and soft, minatory timpani rolls, quotes the music accompanying the 'stone guest' who will drag the Don to his doom. In the main *Allegro* the bustle and clatter of a typical *opera buffa* overture coexist with a frenetic restlessness that epitomises the nature of the protagonist.

Setting out his stall in this most manically driven of operas, Mozart then moves directly to the opening scene: a *buffo* aria for the disgruntled Leporello that alternates unison patten and suavely sustained lines (enhanced by swaggering violin interjections) as he imagines himself, not for the last time in the opera,

in his master's place. Typically, though, the comedy immediately takes on a more dangerous cast as Don Giovanni emerges from Donna Anna's bedroom, with Anna making the musical running and Leporello counterpointing their tense exchanges with his trademark rapid patter. The tone then turns tragic with the appearance of the Commendatore (scything string scales and a harmonic darkening), the duel and the awed *sotto voce* trio in which Mozart deploys his contrapuntal mastery to illuminate the drama: stifled gasps from the dying Commendatore, eloquent cantabile lines for a temporarily reflective Don Giovanni, fearful mutterings from Leporello, culminating in the coda's haunting chromatic lament on woodwind and violas. It is typical that the mood of extreme (and in this opera, unique) poignancy and stillness is comically punctured by Leporello's "Who's dead - you or the old man?", in a brief stretch of 'dry' recitative.

After this another abrupt shift of tone: as master and servant make themselves scarce, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio enter to discover the Commendatore's corpse, in an accompanied recitative whose dissonant shrieks against throbbing violas and sustained horns and bassoons are as elementally terrifying as the overture's famous first chord. The opera's breathless opening sequence – a continuous twenty-minute span encompassing the lightning shifts of mood that characterise the whole work – culminates in the tremendous D minor 'vengeance' duet (Ottavio, as always, following where Anna leads), where the characters work themselves into a state of feverish excitement amid pervasive chromatic wails from flutes, oboes and bassoons.

Following this opening scene, with its novel and brilliantly calibrated mix of comedy and tragedy (Gazzaniga's one-acter had treated the whole Don Juan story as farce), Mozart develops his characters in a vivid sequence of arias and ensembles, *à la Figaro*. As in the earlier opera, the solo numbers enrich and transfigure stock Italian aria types. The catalogue aria was an established *opera buffa* fixture. But Leporello's famous "Madamina", which we can imagine delighting Casanova if he was indeed in that Prague audience, eclipses all-comers in sophistication, witty detail (say, the majestic, slow-burn crescendo on "è la grande" followed by the descending semiquaver patter, with facetious little violin interjections, to evoke "la piccina") and, not least, virtuosic use of the orchestra. In the second part of the aria Leporello lubriciously savours his master's seduction techniques in the tempo and rhythm of an aristocratic minuet. The sly shift from D major to B flat, with insinuating bassoon arpeggios, as he tells Elvira that what the Don likes best of all is a novice, is a comic counterpart to Leporello's terrified reaction when the statue speaks in the graveyard duet.

As the opera's *prima donna*, Donna Anna, most sympathetic of Mozart's gallery of distressed, vengeful women, sings the grandest music, whether in her duet with Ottavio, her two solos, or in the great Act Two Sextet, where she immediately slips from D major to D minor, with music that echoes the 'vengeance' duet. Her reaction to the discovery of Don Giovanni's guilt, "Or sai chi l'onore", is no mere 'vengeance' aria but a magnificent compound of outraged pride, pathos and anguish, as she relives the

trauma of her father's death with a turn from major to minor and grieving countermelodies from bassoon and oboe.

The flashes of vulnerability and warmth Anna has shown earlier in the opera are concentrated in her declaration of love for Don Ottavio, "Non mi dir". In this noble, dulcet aria, in the fashionable Italian slow-fast form, Mozart replaces the oboes by the velvet-toned clarinets, who with the bassoons and a single flute become agents of tender reassurance. Berlioz, who thought the (very modest) display of coloratura in the closing pages jarringly out of character, described the aria's *Larghetto* in effusive terms: "All the poetry of love shines forth in tears and mourning." Many writers, from E.T.A. Hoffmann onwards, have doubted the sincerity of Anna's feelings. Mozart's music, here and in her duet with Ottavio in the final ensemble, surely tells us otherwise.

Zerlina, at once ingenuous and minx-like, and the absurd, neurotically obsessive, yet profoundly touching Donna Elvira are characterised with comparable human insight. Except when she musters a measure of poise in the Act One Quartet, Elvira, as conceived for Prague (the *scena* Mozart composed for Vienna lends her an added nobility), characteristically sings in overwrought, jagged lines that seem to parody Baroque and Classical *opera seria*. Her warning to Zerlina, "Ah fuggi il traditor", has a frantic, skewed majesty, like a Baroque French overture on speed. Yet, ridiculous as she is, Elvira is redeemed by Mozart's Shakespearean sympathy. This is felt above all in the miraculous A major Trio near the start of Act Two that begins in pathos, moves through cruel, *commedia dell'arte* farce as Don Giovanni (serenading Elvira while the disguised Leporello mimes) feigns repentance, and ends in music of radiant tenderness, warmed by clarinets and bassoons playing in thirds: one of those Mozartian moments (there are many in *Così fan tutte*) that transform human frailty and absurdity with music of timeless, transcendent loveliness.

The two arias Zerlina sings to her long-suffering lover Masetto have a seductive grace, the first, "Batti, batti, bel Masetto", enhanced by a delicious part for solo cello, the second, "Vedrai carino", a kind of transfigured pastoral, sensuously scored for flutes, clarinets (usually reserved by Mozart for characters higher up the social scale), bassoons and horns, with the divided violas that enrich the texture of so many of the opera's numbers.

As for the mercurial, elusive Don himself, as many commentators have remarked, he tends to assume the character of whoever he is addressing: plebeian in his quickfire exchanges with Leporello, innocently bucolic in his duet with Zerlina, "Là ci darem la mano", suavely *galant* in his dealings with Elvira and Anna, aristocratically dignified as he proclaims "Viva la libertà" in the Act One finale. He sings two of his three arias – the mandolin-accompanied Serenade to Elvira's maid, and his manipulation of Masetto and his gang in Act Two – disguised as Leporello. His moment of self-revelation comes in the so-called 'champagne aria', "Fin ch'han dal vino": the music of an unreflective, remorselessly active man of

swashbuckling confidence as he prepares for his latest round of seductions. The Don is in similar manically driven mode at the opening of the Act Two finale. Here the wind-band hired for the party goes on to quote tunes from three popular operas of the day, culminating, much to the Prague audience's delight, with Figaro's "Non più andrai": "That's a tune I have heard once too often", splutters Leporello between furtively snatched mouthfuls of pheasant. But it was the music for the stone guest, following Donna Elvira's terrified offstage scream, that for the Romantics gave the opera its defining *tinta*. Here clowning and *terribilità* are not only juxtaposed, as they were in the opening scene, but superimposed. The statue demands the Don's repentance in music of mingled gravitas, terror and harmonic mystery, coloured by baleful trombones, while Leporello, cowed under a table, provides a nervously chattering counterpoint that somehow only enhances the music's awe. Those Viennese who found Mozart's music too 'difficult' must have been baffled at the unearthly harmonic progression at the Commendatore's words "Non si pasce di cibo mortale chi si pasce di cibo celeste", or the chromatically rising diminished sevenths the accompany the line "Tu m'invitasti a cena".

Pace the Romantics, the opera could not end with Don Giovanni, fearlessly unrepentant to the last, being dragged down to the Underworld, perhaps to make a cuckold of Pluto. The genre of *dramma giocoso*, and Enlightenment taste, demanded some kind of resolution of the horror, and the accumulated D minor tensions, we have just experienced. After the Don's disappearance none of them, except perhaps the peasants Zerlina and Masetto, can remain unaffected. In a heartfelt *Larghetto*, Anna asks Ottavio to grant her a year of mourning; with a brief, poignant turn to the minor, Elvira announces she will end her days in a convent, Zerlina and Masetto cheerfully look forward to supper, while Leporello needs to find another, less demanding, master. Then, in a fizzing *Presto* that begins like a fugal exposition, all join to sing the opera's moral, "That's how wrongdoers end". Yet even in this quasi-'happy' ending, Mozart, typically, cannot resist infiltrating moments of heart-stopping beauty, above all the yearning chromatic descent over a long-held pedal point provided by Masetto, Leporello and the orchestral basses: a final touch of enriching ambiguity in an opera that moves with unique speed and sureness between mockery, pathos, terror and the most profound human feeling.

The Mozartists

Violin 1	Matthew Truscott (leader)	Flute	Georgia Browne
	Daniel Edgar		Elizabeth Walker
	Andrew Roberts	Oboe	James Eastaway
	Tuomo Suni		
	Kristin Deeken		
	Davina Clarke		
	George Clifford		
Lucy Waterhouse	Clarinet	Jane Booth	
Violin 2	Sophie Barber	Bassoon	Philip Turbett
	Liz MacCarthy		Zoe Shevlin
	Marianna Szucs	Horn	Roger Montgomery
	William Thorp		
	Anna Curzon		
	Claudia Norz		
	Beatrice Scaldini		
Viola	Alfonso Leal del Ojo	Trombone	Peter Mankarious
	Simone Jandl		Miguel Tantos Sevillano
	Oliver Wilson		Stephanie Dyer
	Marina Ascherson		Andy Lester
Cello	Luise Buchberger (continuo)	Timpani	Scott Bywater
	Gavin Kibble	Mandolin	Matthew Truscott
	Rebecca Truscott		
	Alex Rolton		
Double Bass	Timothy Amherst (continuo)	Harpsichord	Pawel Siwczak (continuo)
	Antonia Bakewell		
	Catherine Ricketts		

'Onstage' Bands

Violin	Kirsten Klingels
	Steven Rouse
	Emilia Benjamin
	Salome Rateau
Double Bass	Christine Sticher

Philharmonia Chorus

Soprano	Zoe Freedman	Tenor	James Hutchings
	Lindsay James		Simon Marsh
	Kate Harris		Grégoire Mourichoux
	Alice Pollock		Steven Swindells
	Sophie Pullen		
	Elisabeth Swedlund		
Alto	Katherine Adams	Bass	Hubert Hill-Reid
	Victoria Aindow		Chavdar Mazgalov
	Milda Fontanetti		James Quilligan
	Jaime Jo Hallam		Benjamin Schilperoort

Additional Bases in Act Two Finale

David Bryant, Sherman Carroll, Dieter Claassen, Philip Dangerfield, Michael Day, Neville Filar, Richard Gaskell, Nigel Gee, Richard Harding, Oliver Hogg, Christopher Hollis, Michael Hughes, Stuart Lakin, Hector Macandrew, Jon Meredith, Matthew Palmer, Peter Quintrell, James Shirras, Paul Thirer, David Walker, Ralph Warman, David Wright.