

## Mozart, Da Ponte and *Don Giovanni*

*Don Giovanni* appears to be a morality tale about the consequences of a licentious life, but Da Ponte called it *giacoso* (playful) and Mozart, *buffa* (comic).

Opera composers have always been bedevilled by the problem of finding appropriate subjects and good librettists. Mendelssohn, who wrote five now largely forgotten operas, had great difficulty in this regard. "Put a real opera libretto into my hands" he told a friend, "and in a few moments it will be composed, for every day I long anew to write an opera.... If you know a man capable writing a libretto, for God's sake tell me."

Mozart thought he had found such a man in May 1783. He wrote to his father to say that he wanted to compose an Italian opera and had been looking through at least a hundred libretti in search of something suitable. He hoped that a certain Abbate Da Ponte would write for him. "He has an enormous amount to do," said Wolfgang, including writing a new piece from scratch for Salieri. "He has promised to write a new libretto for me", Mozart continued. "But who knows whether he will be able to keep his word, or will want to." Da Ponte did keep his word and the result was *The Marriage of Figaro*. This fruitful collaboration continued with *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*.

Mozart's view was that, in opera, "the poetry should be the obedient daughter of the music." His father, Leopold observed: "There will be a lot of running about and discussions before he gets the libretto so adjusted as to suit his purpose exactly." Mozart didn't just set a libretto as presented to him but expected to shape it to fit his musical conception. "An opera is sure of success" he wrote, "when the plot is well worked out, with words written solely for the music and not shoved in here and there to suit some miserable rhyme...I mean, words or even entire verses which ruin the composer's whole idea."

The poet in this instance was willing and able to accommodate the composer's demands. When Mozart first met him, Da Ponte was Court Poet and librettist to the Imperial Theatre in Vienna. He might well have been a character in one of his own operas. He was a tall man with the affectation of leaning so far backwards that he had to support himself on a cane. He had a dandified sense of fashion, a strong lisp and broad Venetian dialect.

He had been born Emanuele Conegliano, the eldest son of a Jewish leather dealer near Venice. After his mother's death when he was five, his father had married a Catholic woman and converted to Christianity. Father and sons were baptised by the local bishop, whose name was: Lorenzo Da Ponte. The eldest boy was given the bishop's name and went on to become a teacher of literature in a seminary. He subsequently took holy orders and celebrated his first Mass in 1773. He was soon discouraged by the petty feuds of Seminary life, resigned his post and moved to Venice. There he indulged in gambling, meddled in Venetian politics, became a follower of Rousseau and a friend of Casanova, published scandalous sonnets, and formed a liaison with a patrician woman called Angela Tiepolo. He continued his religious duties while pursuing another affair with Angioletta Bellaudi, with whom he had several children. He even lived in a brothel for a while, and it was said that he could be seen there, entertaining the clientele by playing the violin, dressed in clerical garb. He seduced his landlady's daughter-in-law and tried to elope with her.

Eventually he was banished from the Venetian state, not for immorality but for his political views, and moved to Dresden. There he fell deeply in love with two sisters, and was also quite friendly with their mother! Unwilling to show partiality, he fled to Vienna. Clearly he was well equipped to write *Don Giovanni*.

He arrived in Vienna with no appointment and very few contacts. At this stage, he had written no plays, had little literary reputation and only slight experience of the theatre. Nevertheless, with the help of the so-called Italian party at court, notably Antonio Salieri and Count Orsini-Rosenberg, he gained access to the Emperor and thence to the post of Court Poet. He collaborated with Salieri on an operatic flop for which he got the blame. Da Ponte was therefore in a receptive mood when Mozart approached him with the subversive subject of Figaro.

In his memoirs, Da Ponte claimed to have recognised Mozart's genius from the beginning. In fact, he doesn't seem to have felt any particular loyalty to Mozart at all and regularly mis-spelt his name. When Da Ponte was writing the libretto for *Figaro*, he was also writing one for another of Mozart's rivals, best remembered by the Italian form of his name, Vincenzo Martini. The resulting opera, *Una cosa rara* was more popular than *Figaro*. Today it is forgotten except, ironically, for a quotation used by Mozart in the supper scene in *Don Giovanni*. The libertine is enjoying himself at the table before the statue arrives. The band plays a popular tune and he says to Leporello: "Bravi! *Cosa rara*!" What do you think of this work?" His servant replies: "It is worthy of you", which is not the compliment it seems, because Leporello then goes on to express revulsion at his master's disgusting eating habits.

It was Mozart's idea to make an opera of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, but Da Ponte's suggestion to use *Don Giovanni*. Da Ponte recorded in his memoirs that he was writing for several composers simultaneously and that in order to accomplish this feat he went to his writing table and remained there continuously for twelve hours at a time. There was, he said, "a bottle of Tokay on the right, the inkstand in the middle, and a box of Seville tobacco to the left. A pretty girl of sixteen years, whom I would have liked to love only as a daughter...was staying in my house with her mother...and would come into my room at the sound of the bell which, in truth, I used to ring often enough, especially when it seemed to me that my inspiration was beginning to wane....At the beginning I used to permit such visits very often; finally I had to make them less frequent in order not to lose much time in loving caresses, of which she was the perfect mistress." Such was the atmosphere in which the drama of the lecherous Don Giovanni unfolded.

Da Ponte had a practical reason for proposing the subject of *Don Giovanni* to Mozart. A few months earlier, it had been turned into an opera called *Don Giovanni Tenorio*, with a libretto by Giovanni Bertati and music by Giuseppe Gazzaniga. Burdened with having to produce three libretti in a short period of time, and having this opera to hand, Da Ponte dipped into it. In his memoirs, he ungraciously calls Bertati a 'windbag' but omits to mention that he had borrowed heavily from his work. And by the way, if you have ever wondered what Don Giovanni's surname is, the answer seems to be 'Tenorio' – although this is never mentioned in Mozart's opera.

In 1791, the year of Mozart's death, Da Ponte was finally driven from Vienna. He had become intimately involved with a prominent soprano and had taken her side in theatrical intrigues and animosities. By now he had plenty of enemies, one of whom

persuaded him to apply nitric acid to an inflamed gum, with the result that some of his teeth fell out.

The Emperor Joseph II's death in 1790 had left Da Ponte without a patron, and he didn't help his own cause by informing the new Emperor, Leopold II, that: "My destiny does not depend on you; with all your power you have no rights over my soul...." His contract was promptly terminated.

Da Ponte left Vienna, married a woman twenty years his junior and eventually settled in London. Staying one step ahead of his creditors, he worked as a tutor of Italian, a bookseller and a librettist to the Drury Lane Theatre. He went bankrupt and moved to the United States, where he was equally unsuccessful as a grocer, purveyor of medicines, owner of a dry-goods and millinery store and transporter of market produce. Eventually, he settled in New York, opened another shop, published his memoirs, helped to establish the Italian Opera House (which closed within a year) and was appointed Professor of Italian (without salary) at Columbia University. Sadly, his last years were spent in poverty and neglect and, like Mozart, he too was buried in an unmarked and now forgotten grave. Da Ponte's was a story of rakishness and retribution, poetry and pathos – in short, the stuff of a Mozart opera.

Thus Don Giovanni works his wiles on the innocent Zerlina, and we are torn emotionally between admiration for his technique and sympathy for the hapless girl and her cuckolded boyfriend Masetto.

The character Don Juan grew out of popular legend. It was given literary form around 1630, in a Spanish play by Tirso de Molina called *The Prankster of Seville and his Stone Guest*. Don Juan became something of a universal character and featured in numerous plays, novels and poems. Over time, the story came to be disparaged by intellectual and cultured people. It became a clown's piece in the German speaking world, the subject of pantomimes and puppet shows with titles like *Don Juan or the Quadruple Murderer*. Its supernatural aspects and the idea of a talking statue were considered rather childish.

In the seventeenth century, strolling Italian players took up the Don Juan story in their repertoire of pantomime, and it spread to France where it was used by Molière, Prosper Mérimée, Alexandre Dumas and Baudelaire. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, it had entered the German theatre repertory as *The Stone Feast*. In an early Italian opera on the subject, written in 1734, the role of Don Giovanni was played by a woman. Now there's a nice complication! In 1736 the Italian playwright Goldoni wrote *Don Giovanni Tenorio, or the Dissolute One*. Gluck's ballet *Don Juan* was performed in Vienna in 1761, and an opera *The Stone Guest or the Dissolute One* was performed in both Vienna and Prague in 1777, ten years before the operas of Gazzaniga and Mozart.

In England there were seventeenth century versions such as Thomas Shadwell's *The Libertine*, and in the nineteenth century, Lord Byron's satiric poem *Don Juan*, which contains the immortal lines:

"Then for accomplishments of chivalry...  
he learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery  
And how to scale a fortress – or a nunnery".

And again:

'What men call gallantry, and the gods adultery,

Is much more common where the climate's sultry."

Clearly, the Don Juan legend had become more amusing than moralising.

Russian poets and composers such as Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dargomizky used the subject, and since Mozart's time, more than a dozen musical works have been composed about Don Juan. In Shaw's play *Man and Superman*, the 'hero' becomes the quarry rather than the huntsman.

But the version I like best is a cheerful satire called *The Commandant's Statue*, given in Paris in 1892. In this, the statue comes to dinner, gets splendidly drunk, dances a *cancan*, and has to be helped back onto its pedestal by Don Juan.

It seems strange that after *Figaro* - an opera based on the most contemporary, risqué material - Mozart and Da Ponte should have chosen an old pantomime story of hellfire and seduction. Part of the reason may have been that this kind of earthy subject actually appealed to Mozart, whose tastes in matters non-musical could be far from elevated. It might also reflect the fact that the work was created for Prague, not Vienna. The less sophisticated citizens of what had become a provincial backwater by Mozart's time could be relied upon to respond to a pantomime theme. It was indeed a success in Prague in 1787 but a comparative failure in Vienna the following year, where its subject matter was the cause of much tut-tutting. Mozart's operas would never be performed again in Vienna in his lifetime. One Viennese critic went so far as to say that while 'Mozart was a great genius...he actually had little culture and little or no informed taste.'

In terms of the overall number of performances between 1782 and 1791, Mozart ranked seventh amongst composers in Vienna. This puts in perspective I think, the poignancy of his predicament in his last years, and the desperate letters that he wrote to acquaintances pleading for loans. Can there be any sadder letter than that written within days of *Don Giovanni's* opening in Vienna. It reads: "Owing to great difficulties and complications, my affairs have become so involved that it is of the utmost importance to raise some money on these two pawnbroker's tickets. In the name of friendship I implore you to do me this favour; but you must do it immediately." When Gluck died, Mozart was appointed to his post of *Kammermusik*, but at half the salary. It was all rather too little, too late, and within a few years, Mozart himself was dead.

Whatever his original motives may have been in agreeing to *Don Giovanni* as a subject, Mozart raised the old pantomime characters to quite another artistic and emotional plane. The hero, if one can call him that, is by turns heroic, seductive, condescending and even comic. Much of this ambivalence is to be found in the music, and we can detect it right from the start. The overture begins with the frighteningly portentous music associated with the Commendatore's statue and Don Giovanni's ultimate catastrophe, but the sombre mood quickly dissolves into a more carefree, even playful one.

In Mozart's own thematic catalogue, he lists *Don Giovanni* as an *opera buffa*. This form was increasingly admired during the Enlightenment as representing reality rather than the refined pomposity of the nobility. Characters were drawn from everyday life instead of from abstract ideals, and they shared similar thoughts and desires regardless of social status. Nevertheless, *opera buffa* was regarded as musically and intellectually inferior to *opera seria*. It was the operetta, the musical comedy of the eighteenth century.

Mozart and Da Ponte were not the first to combine serious and comic features in *opera buffa*, but what distinguishes Mozart's approach is the profundity with which he invests less than profound themes. Listen, for example, to the scene in which Donna Elvira, Donna Anna and Don Ottavio, dressed in masquerade, set out to beard the wicked Don in his lair. Their mood, though vengeful, is apprehensive, and they try to bolster each other's courage. Then Leporello opens a window of his master's house and leans out. A ball is in progress. The musical mood changes and sounds of the dance come floating out into the night. Don Giovanni tells him to invite the three masked strangers to the ball, and there are some amusing moments when Leporello tries to catch their attention. The invitation is extended, the window is closed and the mood changes yet again as the three masked avengers pray for heaven's protection. So, in the space of just a few minutes, Mozart expresses determination, apprehension, frivolity and supplication, in a scene which, on the surface, is no more than an invitation to a ball.

In the last scene of all, the singers step out of character to point the moral: "This is the end of the sinner's game; his life and death are just the same." The double fugue to which these words are set seems appropriate to their moralising, but then it develops with brilliance into a mocking *opera buffa* chorus.

So what is *Don Giovanni* in the end - a morality tale or a musical jest? Perhaps it is both. The unique potency of this unlikely combination lies at the heart of what many people regard as Mozart's finest opera.

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