

The psychiatry of opera

Don Giovanni

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In the second of this occasional series, Mark Jones looks at Mozart and his 1788 masterpiece, *Don Giovanni*, and interviews Tom Sutcliffe, opera critic of *The Guardian*, about his views on this problematical work and its portrayal on the stage.

In these articles different aspects of our understanding of human nature as illustrated in opera will be looked at. The title 'The Psychiatry of Opera' you might feel is slightly misleading when you look at the content of the articles. Yet I only intend it to be a broad blanket description for what I hope will be thought-provoking pieces encompassing both the 'hard' and 'soft' aspects of psychiatry. It is after all a complex discipline which must now take account of sociological and philosophical thought.

Don Giovanni is a strange opera which, to a greater or lesser extent over the years, has perplexed me. It is also packed with fascinating characters, and music of great insight. I think to understand the character of *Don Giovanni*, never mind the whole opera, is a challenge equal to piecing together an understanding of our most difficult patients.

Mozart and Vienna

Mozart was a genius. Both admired and admonished during his own lifetime, we no longer doubt his extraordinary abilities as a composer and dramatist. He is for some the greatest man of music to have ever lived; what is certain is that he created music of entirely new richness and depth. He challenged the late 18th century Viennese public with musical and dramatic concepts that won him acclaim but also found him enemies. Notable among the latter was court composer Antonio Salieri, who, if Mozart's father, Leopold, is to be believed, said of the first performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*, that it would be remarkable if it succeeds, "... for I know that extraordinary cabals have been mounted against him. Salieri with his followers have set heaven and earth in motion again to defeat him..." (Mozart, *Brief, III*, 536).

Although Mozart spent many productive years in his home town of Salzburg under the watchful eye of

his composer father, the move to Vienna came in 1780/81 and was accompanied by a blossoming of his genius. It was here that the vital meeting with the powerful poet and intellectual, Lorenzo da Ponte, occurred in 1782, and so began probably the most important collaboration of librettist and composer to date. Interestingly, da Ponte was a political exile from Italy and had come to Vienna in 1782 with a letter of recommendation to Salieri! Mozart was a German composer anxious to write Italian opera in a city already dominated by Paisiello, Salieri and Cimarosa. These composers had far more success in their day and on 'home ground' than Mozart. Certainly he was viewed with suspicion and seen as an outsider by the Court, and as unlikely to achieve the status attributed to the real Italians.

Mozart was a man of the Enlightenment. Yet until the death of the Hapsburg Empress Marie Theresa in November 1780, the expression of ideas contained in the three great da Ponte operas (*The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan Tutte*) would not have passed the censors. With the ascension of Joseph II to the Hapsburg throne, the power of the censors' office was curtailed, the Church and feudal systems in Austria were fragmented and reformed, the new emperor became the champion of the disadvantaged. Yet these were politically sensitive times; within the decade the French Revolution was to rock Europe. Mozart must have known of the French scandal surrounding Beaumarchais' play *Le Mariage de Figaro*, which it was felt would ignite insurrection among the poor. Yet he felt it would be, as an opera, a sure-fire hit, which indeed it was. The first performance took place on 1 May 1786; its fame soon spread and Mozart was acclaimed.

Mozart: genius and madman?

Mystery surrounds the death of Mozart; still more shrouds his bungled funeral in an unmarked grave outside Vienna. It would seem from the records of those who attended him during his last illness, and what we know about his early life, that he died from chronic renal failure caused by recurrent

streptococcal throat infections. His body was so swollen with oedema that putrefaction set in rapidly, despite the chill of winter, and so no time was lost in burying him. Between the success of Figaro and his untimely death at the age of 35 on 5 December 1791, Mozart was to produce his most perfect compositions but it was a time marked by bouts of depression. It has been suggested, by Dr Peter Davies (*Musical Times*, March 1987, 123–126), among others, that Mozart had a leaning towards manic-depressive illness. Certainly, many works from the Vienna period, especially after 1785, reached a depth of soul-searching not paralleled by contemporary works of other notable composers. Out of some 13 works cited by the Mozart authority, H. C. Robbins Landon, during the six years from 1785–91 the 24th piano concerto in C minor (1786) and the symphony No. 40 in G minor will be familiar to many. These two works stand astride the epoch-making *Don Giovanni* of 1787, the year of further serious illness to Mozart, the departure of friends back to England, and the deaths not only of two close friends (Count August Hatzfeld and Dr Sigmund Barisani), but also the devastating loss of his father on 28 May.

Don Giovanni: origins and revisions

Don Giovanni was based loosely on the Don Juan legend and took note of the popular opera *Il Convitato di Pietra* by the then well-known composer Gazzaniga, premiered in Venice at the beginning of 1787. An opera had been commissioned from Mozart for a royal occasion, but in the event *The Marriage of Figaro* was given instead, *Don Giovanni* eventually being premiered on 29 October. Its success has been almost entirely posthumous; as it did not find favour in Prague at its first airing Mozart made cuts and revisions in order that it might be more acceptable to the Viennese. Significantly, the final sextet which comes after *Don Giovanni's* descent into hell was omitted in the Vienna version as was Ottavio's Second Act aria; additions included Elvira's aria "Mi tradi", which only added fuel to the fire for those who thought the structure of the second act in particular too loose and dramatically incoherent.

Synopsis

Any synopsis of an opera cannot do justice to the fine detail of the work, particularly because music is so integral to our understanding of what is happening. Nevertheless, a brief overview of *Don Giovanni* is given below to enable readers unfamiliar with it to grasp the dramatic essentials, and the relationships of the characters to each other.

CHARACTERS

Bass:	The Commendatore
Soprano:	Donna Anna, his daughter
Tenor:	Don Ottavio, her fiance
Baritone:	Don Giovanni, a nobleman
Bass:	Leporello, his servant
Soprano:	Donna Elvira, a lady of Burgos, deserted by Don Giovanni
Soprano:	Zerlina, a peasant girl, betrothed to Masetto
Baritone:	Masetto, a peasant

The cataclysmic D minor chords which open the overture (see musical example inset) instantly injects a tension which anticipates the banquet at which the statue appears. It also signals that the opera, despite its *drama giocosa* billing (i.e. with comic elements), means serious business.

DON GIOVANNI

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Overture W. A. Mozart

Andante

The overture runs into the first number which finds Leporello outside the house of Donna Anna, in Seville, waiting for the Don who is inside, we assume seducing her. *Don Giovanni* runs from the house pursued by Donna Anna. The Commendatore finds the Don struggling with his daughter, fights with him and is killed. Giovanni makes light of the murder, before Anna with Ottavio return to find the corpse. Ottavio comforts her and swears vengeance on the assassin.

The Don and Leporello come across Donna Elvira, as yet unrecognised by them, but a former victim of the Don's. She has loved and lost, then been deserted and betrayed, grief consumes her but she is ready to forgive. She finds herself being consoled by *Don Giovanni* who suddenly recognises her and makes a fast exit, leaving Leporello to explain why the Don left her. He shows Elvira the 'Madamina' catalogue of his master's conquests, 2065 to date. She is speechless.

At the village wedding of Zerlina and Masetto, near the Don's palace, Giovanni arrives and attempts to seduce Zerlina, but is foiled by the timely interruption of Elvira. The first act ends with the recognition by Anna of Giovanni's voice as the man who entered her bedroom, and she, Ottavio and Elvira go in search of Giovanni to accuse him of the Commendatore's murder. They find him holding a Ball at his palace for the wedding. He sings the champagne aria before attempting the more violent

seduction of Zerlina. The three maskers hurl their accusations at the Don who is attempting to suppress the screams of Zerlina in an anteroom. He appears and makes his escape.

Act II. Leporello disguised as the Don makes advances to Elvira while she sits on her balcony lamenting the loss of Giovanni. She is lured into the garden and away from the house so that Giovanni can seduce her maid. He mocks her protestations of love as Leporello begins to enjoy the charade. Masetto and some peasants turn up intent on finding Don Giovanni and killing him. They find who they think is Leporello, who divides them up and sends them off to search for their victim. Giovanni then beats up Masetto and leaves him to be found by Zerlina. Leporello is discovered with Elvira and unmasked. In the chaos Leporello escapes into a graveyard and finds Don Giovanni there.



A scene from English National Opera's revival of Mozart's 'Don Giovanni'. Steven Page (Don Giovanni) Sean Rea (Commendatore)

The statue of the Commendatore, which has been erected in the cemetery, speaks to Giovanni, who in turn invites him to supper. Back at his palace, Don Giovanni is enjoying his dinner. Elvira enters and begs the man who has betrayed her to mend his ways. He refuses and Elvira leaves distraught; a scream is heard from the corridor and Leporello is sent to discover what has happened. Her scream is echoed by his and he returns to say the statue is outside. The lights dim and the statue enters. It speaks: "Don Giovanni, you did invite me to supper, so bid me welcome." The statue tells the Don to repent all his sins, but he refuses, and Don Giovanni is dragged down to Hell by demons. All the characters then enter to arrest the Don for the Commendatore's murder. Leporello gives a comic account of recent

events and each of them sings in turn of their plans for the future.

Mark Jones discusses Don Giovanni with Tom Sutcliffe

I recently talked to Tom Sutcliffe, opera critic at *The Guardian*, about his view of Don Giovanni. He is a man who has a strong sense of what opera should be about and feels passionately about the way it is performed; he is certainly a controversial figure in a field dogged by conservatism, and has found himself in conflict with opera management over policy. He recently described David Freeman's Opera Factory Production of Don Giovanni as, "... (an) uncharacteristic mishmash of masks and glitzy costumes and lubricious humping – by usual Opera Factory standards – an incoherent Farrago." (*Guardian Arts*, 12.2.90). So, what, I asked him, is Don Giovanni all about?

"I believe that some people see themselves hounded by fate or some superior hand, nothing to do with human laws or agencies of enforcement. Don Giovanni is a morality drama. The problem the audience has is whether it's supposed to feel approval or disapproval for the Don; the 'test' is over the behaviour of the central character, how exactly is it to be understood?"

Tom Sutcliffe argues that the Don appears to test the bounds of behaviour and liberty in society, and doesn't see that what he's doing is peculiar: "He does what most people want to do, I suppose he's the embodiment of masculine libido." The story is presented from the Don's standpoint, there are very few scenes where the Don isn't present or a sympathetic observer is close at hand. Leporello is closest to the Don, and is a commentator on Giovanni's actions; he and the Don can be seen as two aspects of the same phenomenon, masculine and non-masculine, self-serving and serving.

The character of Don Giovanni

Interestingly, Sutcliffe suggests that Giovanni is more of a force of nature than a 17th century figure (Don Juan). The characters don't actually interact with each other, because they interact through the Don; "We are supposed to understand that he's the catalyst, his participation is crucial to both the narrative process and the emotional development of the characters. Giovanni is liberated and able to liberate others. He has a sexualising influence which goes far beyond the physical, since Giovanni overrides the ambivalence of his victims 'choices', he gives them an opportunity to free themselves by having a relationship with him." Sutcliffe sees him as a Wordsworthian liberated phenomenon, characteristic of Mozart and the Italian tradition, which

allows the expression of libido without it appearing in some way sordid, as in Ibsen or Strindberg.

"Eroticism is one way people can find out what they mean to each other, although this is only a very temporary phenomenon. Mozart was clear about this: although very fond of his wife, Constanze, we know from his letters, he felt unable to tie her down. Mozart often talked of "forgiveness". Certainly it was much easier for women to betray men during Mozart's time, if only because of the disguises allowed women. Of course, women were very protected, but in another way they were also much more available, being as it were, part of an under-caste. We are also far from sure that Mozart himself was a successful lover, particularly in a Casanova-like way, yet we feel he is closer to his female than male characters, particularly in Don Giovanni".

"Don Giovanni is like opening doors on emotional voyages," says Sutcliffe. "People are offered through wooing a vision or horizon much wider than they had before – to see the Don as a satire is completely wrong. What he offers them is real fulfilment as sexual beings and change in social status because of their relationship with a nobleman". Some people see the character of the Don as dangerous, he's like having a tiger in the same room as yourself, but Sutcliffe argues there's nothing in the opera to support the view that the Don's a psychopath: "Maybe he's manipulative, but what we need to know about him is that he is a very successful Casanova figure, and a lot of the women will cherish the memories he gave them – there's no reason to think the Madamina Catalogue is a load of coitus interruptus!"

Perhaps the work is best viewed as a parable, which tells us what happens to someone who doesn't fit in with society, yet the whole drift of the work is that we are meant to approve of this not fitting in. The opera makes you feel this is all perfectly natural, perhaps too natural, since it goes beyond reason and responsibility. The liberation he suggests and makes available to others is very problematical because not everyone is capable of embracing it. The women of Mozart's time were not in a position to choose exactly what they wanted to make of the love they were offered. This was an important point that Mozart wanted to drive home, and if you embrace Tom Sutcliffe's view of this opera, the message is there to be read.

The remaining characters

What about the other characters in the opera? "Well, two of the other male characters are attached to two of the female victims. Our attitude to Masetto, for example, is interesting because the Don lies to Zerlina; he wants his pleasure but not the responsibility for her. Perhaps Zerlina would in fact have done better for herself with the Don than with the

wimpish Masetto, although it's unlikely. Giovanni, in a sense, is deluding himself because what he says at the time to Zerlina he really believes. I think it's an imaginative exercise in improving herself by the Don making possible the thought of 'You need something better than Masetto'. Zerlina goes along with this, yet she's not stupid. It's the Don's sexuality which is attractive, particularly because Masetto isn't very sexy".

Because Don Ottavio had two arias written for him, but neither version (Vienna and Prague) incorporates both, Tom Sutcliffe argues that to perform either version as written provides only an incomplete picture of the character. It does no justice to Ottavio since both arias give him a chance to express himself in a different way. It also gives us a further glimpse into how he understands the relationship between men and women. Where does Elvira fit in? "Elvira is in an interesting position, because she constantly fluctuates. Donna Anna has had it, Zerlina doesn't quite ever have it, Elvira has had it but still wants it. She is torn between what she knows about the Don and still wanting to possess him; the question she asks is whether someone can trust a relationship of love? Anna, on the other hand, does really change since she becomes more and more resolute as the work proceeds."

Tom Sutcliffe sees all the characters being drawn together in this opera by their dislike of Don Giovanni's liberating (sexualising) influence. "There can be no doubt that all the characters come together and attest their dislike of the Don, except Elvira who is ambivalent about him. Elvira is willing to look absurd because she's sexually obsessed and sufficiently liberated to realise it. She shouldn't be laughed at since she's passionate and prepared to try and tame the 'inspiration' that Don Giovanni represents. She is the only one with real potential for love, and in the pursuit of this is willing to look ridiculous. To some extent Ottavio is the same".

Mozart the egalitarian

Mozart was a man of the Enlightenment. To what extent does the opera reveal his thoughts? "All the characters are people of the Enlightenment, Zerlina and Masetto are particularly equal. The work was written by someone who was egalitarian in his instincts, who thought that was the way society would probably go, but there were things to prevent it happening at that time. Certainly he was intellectually involved in these discussions with the Masons in Vienna, and there were no women Masons, let's face it! Otherwise the opera can be seen in terms of the possibility of repentance (change), but DG doesn't think he's done anything wrong and sets himself above the system of judgement. We have to assume that this is essential to his personality".

The stage and Don Giovanni

How have some producers handled the opera in recent years? "When one sees an opera in the flesh with its particular passions and values, people do certain things and we must understand what they are doing. My criticisms of Berghaus (Welsh National Opera, 1983), were that she underplayed the sympathetic aspects of the Don's character. This was very different from the production for Glyndebourne in the late '70s by Peter Hall who, after all is a man many times married! His view was very interesting because it was presented in the context of religion, a formal understanding of morality. Berghaus, on the other hand, wanted to relate much more closely to images of sex. It's very difficult to explain the relationship between the brain and sex visually, but she had the stage looking like some form of brain, it was all broken up; you could equally well think of it as mud flats. The characters spent much of their time sticking swords into this 'brain', like some form of acupuncture. She was in a rather intellectual way putting across a libidinous context difficult to suggest in visual terms".

David Freeman's recent Opera Factory production (February/March 1990, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London) was contrary to the whole metaphysical issue of DG, according to Sutcliffe, precisely because it was puritanical. "We all know that death comes and you can't go on sowing your wild oats forever. The Don's refusal not to accept this is not a stupid, but a noble refusal, and we should be moved by it. It is upsetting because it looks forward to our forthcoming mortality". This is why Mr Sutcliffe argues for the inclusion of the sextet right at the end of Don Giovanni, simply because it shows us the world without him.

"How did Jonathan Miller's English National Opera version strike you with the images of dead babies/foetuses on stage for the Don's descent into Hell?" "This was particularly idiotic. The fact that

the Don may have conceived many children is neither here nor there. There are some societies where the conception of children is seen as entirely good. If survival of the fittest means anything and the Don is strong and good at seducing, why should this be seen as an inferior form of parenthood? What matters is whether the Don can get it up, which is what the catalogue says".

Sutcliffe admits that the way he read Peter Sellars 1989 Pepsico Opera Festival version (Purchase, USA), had a lot to do with his own way of reading Don Giovanni. "His Don was very liberated and in some ways very irresponsible". In this production, both the Don and Leporello were black drug dealers in an American city ghetto, Leporello being seen as the 'alter-ego' of the Don. "DG is presented as not accepting any limits, he is presented as being prepared to be outside society but not an outcast. He is seen as successful within society, but not conforming to the rules of the street. There is this extraordinary ending which Sellars imposes on the piece where the Commendatore doesn't drag the Don down to Hell, but a child who emerges from the church does. Quite a lot of people found it difficult to understand what that exactly meant . . . was this a man who will go to any lengths, women and children now but dogs next? I didn't see it like that at all, here was the innocence of an unfettered appetite, which goes along with his willingness to expose himself to 'unnatural' substances, like heroin. It's a freshness really. I think that Sellars was saying we attempt to sophisticate ourselves, but in fact we're very simple, and at the end we revert back to our basic elements. God, how I'd love to talk to him about it?" I feel exactly the same, but I'd rather talk to Mozart.

Recommended reading

H. C. Robbins Landon: 1791, *Mozart's Last Year*, and by the same author, *Mozart 1781–1791, The Golden Years*.