

Mozart's *Don Giovanni*,

o sia Il dissoluto punito, (or The Rake Punished)

Libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte

By Carol Crocca

Don Giovanni is called a “*dramma giocoso*” by librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, although Mozart himself used the more common “*opera buffa*” or “comic opera.” According to The Harvard Dictionary of Music, a *dramma giocoso* is “A comic opera with some serious elements. The term was introduced in the middle of the eighteenth century by Carlo Goldoni to describe his librettos in which serious characters, from an aristocratic social class, interacted with comic servants and peasants.” The most famous example is *Don Giovanni*.

It should be remembered that in the 18th century all operas had happy endings so as to comport with the Enlightenment view that society was properly ordered; the difference between *opera buffa* and *opera seria* (serious opera) was in subject matter and the absence of lower-class characters in the latter, except in incidental roles. So the term “*dramma giocoso*” was useful to indicate that the lower orders were given significant parts.

A great deal of text has been expended on just how else this opera could be characterized, formerly there being numerous votes for the “tragedy” denomination, despite the clear intentions of Mozart and Da Ponte. It matters little to the opera audience what the cognoscenti may call it, as the tale involving the libertine and the stone dinner guest was perennially popular in all its versions. The character Don Juan is first found in what can only be described as a morality play by the monk Tirso de Molina in 1630, which was intended as a warning during the Counter-Reformation against unbounded sensuality; another was *Faust*, a warning against hubris. The explicit morality play is not an opera genre, but *opera buffa*'s role, like the *commedia dell'arte* from which it sprang, was always to instruct in the moral virtues indirectly - by its caricature of vanity, greed, lechery, deceit, and snobbery, and the thwarting or conversion of those characters personifying them.

Whatever one may call it, *Don Giovanni* is unusual in that its basic plot is established in the first scene: Donna Anna is seduced/raped (there has also been considerable debate on this point), her father is killed in a duel with Don Giovanni, and the question is whether her honor and the death will be avenged. Until the denouement at the end of Act II, the rest of the opera is taken up, not by advancing this purpose, but in an extensive series of sub-plots, demonstrating how Don Giovanni operates, how richly he deserves to be punished and how ineffective human means appear to be in achieving this (is not Ottavio singularly useless?). Buffa deceit and disguises alternate with apparently more serious scenes. In the end, only divine, or at least supernatural, intervention can overcome Don Giovanni's almost heroic defiance and refusal to repent. He becomes more than a trivial philanderer - he becomes a personification of the transcendent demonic. But is not his downfall a happy ending?

An aspect of comic opera less often mentioned is its role in making fun of serious opera. While the death of the Commendatore can hardly be deprived of solemnity, are other "serious" scenes in *Don Giovanni* intended as parody? One of my sources has this to say about Donna Anna's relating her experience of the night in question to Ottavio (Act I, No. 10, Accompanied Recitative and Aria, "Or sai che l'onore"):He goes on to

Now, it is reported that 18th century audiences found this a particularly hilarious scene – especially Don Ottavio's line "Respiro!" ("I breathe again"); it was obvious to everybody that Don Giovanni had, as they say, taken his pleasure of Donna Anna for there are noticeable gaps and discrepancies in a story which is far too much concerned with an attack on Anna's honor and far too little with the killing of her father.

Spike Hugues, Famous Mozart Operas, Dover Publications, NY, 1972, p. 97



He goes on to point out, among other clues, the fact that Giovanni had no particular further interest in Donna Anna: had he been unsuccessful, his interest would have continued until he *had* succeeded. To the 18th century audience, a rape was a crime as much against the male relatives of the victim as against the victim, and the seduction of women per se not necessarily of the consequence it would be today; it might therefore be the subject of less serious treatment than a modern audience would expect. *And* there is still the question of whether Donna Anna is more upset to have been abandoned than she is to have been ravished. I can imagine this scene played quite differently, with Donna Anna glancing covertly at Ottavio to see how he is responding, and building the tension to the point when she says she managed to deter her assailant – provoking the laughter at “Respiro!” The fact that when she leaves, Ottavio is still unsure that Don Giovanni is the culprit because he is a “gentleman” might have been further cause for laughter by the audience.

However, as in his other comedies, Mozart is not content to leave us without genuinely moving moments. It may be ironic that he ever used the “buffa” designation – because of his more complex characters and the deeper portrayal of their motives and emotions, he is often considered outside the mainstream of opera buffa in Italian. In *Don Giovanni*, for example, Elvira is the one seduced woman, apparently without an inconvenient male relative or fiancé, who, against her better judgment, pities and cares for Don Giovanni (Act II, No. 17, “Mi tradi quell’alma ingrata”). In the final scene, she begs him to repent for the sake of his immortal soul, an issue about which no other human character in the opera is concerned. She is also the one who has warned and tried to protect Zerlina – of all the characters, she invites our sympathy, the most human and humane person in the drama, not obsessed solely by her own misfortune. And, as in *Figaro*, Mozart makes the plight of the servant characters obvious, and gives expression to their feelings, whether they are disgruntled, downtrodden, rebellious, or matter of fact. Mozart is Mozart. He has been compared to Shakespeare in his skill in portraying the human tragi-comedy, the master at elucidating the two inextricable sides of the human drama.