

Don Giovanni Mozart's Italian Masterpiece

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D O N G I O V A N N I

MOZART'S ITALIAN MASTERPIECE

by Thomas ARCHER

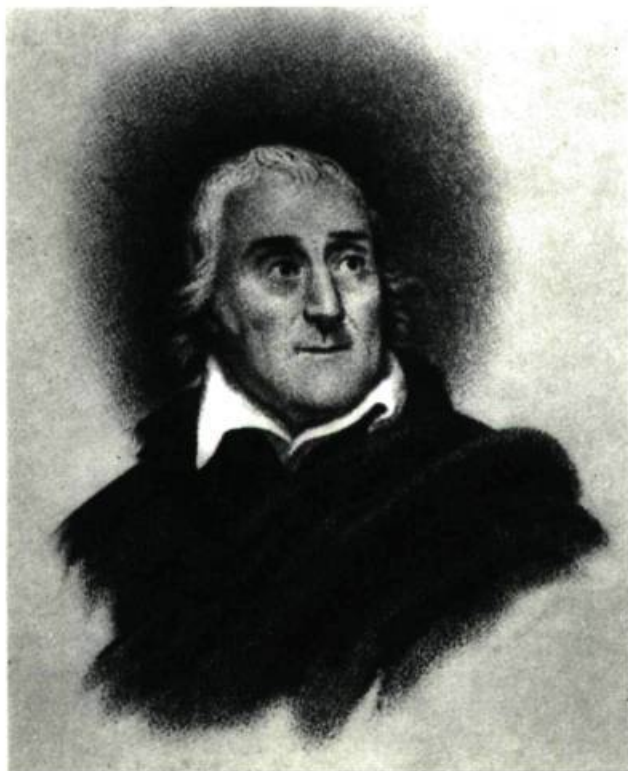
ABOUT midway through the nine years of his *Conversations with Goethe*, fortunate Johann Peter Eckermann asked the great man a daring question :

"Is there a composer who could write fitting music to your 'Faust'?"

The 80 year-old Goethe's answer was emphatic :

"It is quite impossible. Such music would have to be partly repulsive, perverse and fearsome, and that is against the spirit of the times. Such music would have to be in the character of Don Giovanni. Mozart is the only one who could have set Faust to music."

It was a magnificent gesture of recognition from the greatest dramatic poet of his time to the greatest dramatic composer, younger than Goethe by ten years but doomed to die when the poet was on the threshold of his feal greatness. The omission of Beethoven in Goethe's calculation is another story.



The Goethe quotation has a profounder significance in relation to Don Giovanni which is being given one of its comparatively rare North American productions during the 1957 Montreal Music and Drama Festival. It is one of the three definitive interpretations of three legendary figures which lay at the very base of literary thought and philosophy during the amazing century following the decline of the Italian Renaissance, the century of Shakespeare and the rise of the French classical theatre.

I refer to Don Juan, Don Quixote and Faust, the first two Spanish in origin, the third German. They symbolized the meaning of life for the men living in an age when values were changing for the first time since Charlemagne; an age of bitter religious dispute and the beginnings of practical scientific enquiry.

Don Quixote, the perfect gentleman and chevalier sans peur et reproche, was defined once and for all by Miguel de Cervantes. And, if we are to believe the late Miguel de Unamuno, Rector of the University of Salamanca, Don Quixote is in effect not a satire on outmoded chivalry but a parable inspired by St. Ignatius of Loyola, warrior-priest of the mind and champion of the idealism inherited from the Church of the Middle Ages. The eternal idealist, in short, with his divine impatience with men's frailties and deceptions.

Faust and Don Juan had to wait longer for genius to give them its ultimate recognition. Faust, the enquiring magician and scientist, after a brilliant improvisation by Christopher Marlowe, led a wandering life which gradually declined into the Punch and Judy puppet-play Goethe saw as a boy in the market-place in Frankfort. Not until 1830, the year following his talk with Eckermann, did Goethe finish the job of turning Faust from a melodrama of damnation into a spiritual drama of redemption.

Similarly Don Juan had to wait for Mozart. And of the three Don Juan was, I think, the most difficult to handle. Don Quixote is a saint, Faust, according to the Lord in Goethe's Prologue, "a good man with an instinct for treading the right path". But Don Juan is by any count what the Psalmist would call "a naughty man", a blasphemer, a seducer and a sensual-

LORENZO DA PONTE (1749-1838). *Gravure.*
Auteur du livret de Don Juan.

ist. His saving grace is that with it all he is a gentleman. He sins abominably but he sins gracefully and therein lies his eternal fascination. Extreme types are always absorbing. And Don Juan in his pursuit of sensual pleasure is potentially just as much so as Don Quixote in his pursuit of an ideal and Faust in his pursuit of knowledge that will benefit mankind. All three and up where they ought to; Quixote and Faust in Heaven, Juan in Hell.

But Don Juan, as we are speaking of him, had to wait for two men who came together by one of those divine accidents which seem pre-ordained; Lorenzo da Ponte, born Emanuel Conegliano, baptized Jew and renegade priest, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Catholic, Freemason and by culture, half German and half Italian.

We could easily pass up all that happened to Don Juan before what happened to him when, in all his detestable but charming enormities, he swept glittering across the stage of the Prague National Theatre on the night of October 29, 1787. But a little background does no harm and may even help in the appreciation of the unique musico-dramatic figure in his unique Mozartian surroundings.

Serious claims have been advanced that there really was a Don Juan Tenorio, who was the scandal of Seville during the high hidalgo days of Philip II. In any event sometime about 1615 or so there appeared in Spanish a play called *The Seducer of Seville*, attributed to Gabriel Tellez alias Tirso de Molina. Tellez or Molina was no genius but he started the ball rolling, for the next time we meet Don Juan he is the subject of a moral play in the remarkable repertory of the theatre sponsored by the Jesuit Fathers in the interests of regaining Southern Germany lost to the Faith in the Protestant Reformation.

Already in the Jesuit play the main characters have been defined; the wicked gentleman who attempts to seduce the governor's daughter and kills the governor in the ensuing duel, challenges his statue to dinner and gets carried away to Hell as a punishment. The daughter's respectable squire and the comic servant are also in the cast. The play ended with a marvellous display of what happened to Don Juan in Hell which Da Ponte and Mozart mercifully spare us. It is significant that, in Northern Germany, contemporary Lutheran clergymen were making a similar use of Faust as a moral and spiritual corrective.

But the Don escaped the clergy and luckily fell into the hands of that wonderful improvised Italian theatre known as the *Commedia dell'arte*. The Don Juan theme turns up in 1650 in Naples with Harlequin as the precursor of none other than our own Leporello. Indeed if Leporello, as of Da Ponte and Mozart, is sung and played properly, he will deliver his leering asides not to himself but directly to the audience, for that is what Harlequin did and what

PAGE TITRE DE LA PARTITION DE DON JUAN
GRAVÉE POUR LA REPRÉSENTATION DONNÉE EN
1827 AU THÉÂTRE DE L'ODÉON, À PARIS.

Bibliothèque du conservatoire de Montréal.

Da Ponte and Mozart quite evidently wanted done.

From the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Don Juan passed into France and eventually fell into the hands of real genius, namely Moliere. It is not within my province to estimate Moliere's treatment of the subject except to say that it is not one of his best plays and that it by no means exhausted the theme in the way Don Giovanni does. But Moliere rendered one vital service to the provenance of the legend. He created Donna Elvira, thus adding two more crimes to the *Catalogo di Don Giovanni*: blasphemy of the Sacrament of Marriage and Wife-Desertion. Da Ponte was quick to seize on this and in *Donna Elvira* he and Mozart created one of the most remarkable of all operatic characters.

In 1738 the great Italian author of comedies, Carlo Goldoni, wrote a semi-Don Juan play which seems to have started the legend on its operatic career. It was set and reset in the easy 18th century way, one Neapolitan version going right down to Hell with the Don and having him sing a florid aria while the devils tormented him.

Two Don Giovanni operas were produced in Venice the very year of the premiere of our Don Giovanni. And scholars have been quick to point out that Da Ponte made all the use possible of any previous libretti he could lay his hands on. Plagiarism was unknown in those days for there were no copyrights and the fittest survived which is not a bad rule where art is concerned.

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DON JUAN,
ou
Le Festin de Pierre,
Opéra en quatre Actes,
D'après Molière et le Drame Italien,
Par les ajustés sur la Musique
DE MOZART
par M. Castil-Blaze.
Représente pour la première fois le
PRIX : 60!
N^o 2. du Répertoire de M. CASTIL-BLAZE.
à Paris.
A LA LYRE NORMANDE, Successeur de M. de la Chapelle, Rue Vivienne, N^o 11.
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JEUNE MUSICIEN AU CLAVIER. Portrait de Mozart. Peinture de Duplessis.

*Musée du Louvre.
Ektachrome Lanierce, Paris.*

Admirers of Mozart as a musical dramatist (and who isn't?) will always profoundly regret that he and Lorenzo da Ponte didn't meet earlier or at least didn't collaborate earlier. For it was not until three years after their first meeting that they got together for *The Marriage of Figaro*, the first truly modern libretto in the operatic repertory. But let us be grateful at any rate for *Figaro*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* which, with *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and *Die Zauberflöte*, make Mozart the equal if not the superior of Wagner and Verdi.

Mozart suggested *Figaro* to Da Ponte following the success of Paisiello's *Barber of Seville*, taken like *Figaro* from the Paris plays of Beaumarchais. To Da Ponte falls the honor of suggesting *Don Giovanni* to Mozart. Da Ponte did a better job with it than he even did with *Figaro*. The latter was adapted directly from Beaumarchais' play and is complex and highly detailed comedy. *Don Giovanni*, as a subject, had already been refined to operatic proportions.

The Montreal performance this summer will be sung in Da Ponte's original Italian text which, for a preponderantly Latin city, is as correct as singing a French opera in French. Like *Figaro*, it is an untranslatable masterpiece, one of the best in the repertory. If you have just a smattering of Italian it will repay a reading before hearing the opera. In *Le Barbier de Seville*, *Figaro* says to the Count, "aujourd'hui, ce qui ne vaut pas la peine d'être dit, on le chante." That most decidedly doesn't apply to *Don Giovanni*.

In approaching the score of *Don Giovanni* it is as well to know something about the form it takes. Opera is one of the great inventions of the theatre and it was invented in Florence, first creative city of modern Europe. It quickly found a genius in Claudio Monteverdi. It opened the first public roofed theatre in Europe. It became during the 17th and 18th century pretty well what the movies are today.

It was dominated, as was natural, by the Italians, and they found a definition which has still basally served until the present day; detailed action in quick by sung dialogue, individual songs to characterize the protagonists and a joining together of everybody to make a good end to the act.

The operatic formula which conquered Europe for about 200 years went so far as to divide operatic composition into serious opera (*opera seria*) and comic opera (*opera buffa*). It led to two opera houses in Paris, the *Opera* and the *Opera Comique*. It produced *opera seria* men like Wagner, Verdi and Puccini, and *opera buffa* men like Rossini, Offenbach and Sullivan. It also produced compromises between the serious and the comic like Gounod's *Faust*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Massenet's *Manon* and Puccini's *La Bohème*.

Mozart and Da Ponte called *Don Giovanni* a "dramma giocoso" which may be translated as "comic drama." Actually it is an *opera buffa* with tragic overtones, the first and still the greatest work of its kind in this respect. We have in it a marvellous comic song, Leporello's Catalogue aria, and the profoundly tragic scene in which Donna Anna mourns the death of her father, a scene which has been matched by critics with Isolde's lament over Tristan in Wagner's masterpiece.

In characterization it ranges all the way from low life to high life, from Leporello to Donna Anna and from the charming soubrette, Zerlina, to the vengeful Donna Elvira. No opera in the repertory runs a greater gamut in this respect.

Likewise in the music the range of style is extraordinary. In the statue music and in Donna Anna's two arias (*Or sai che l'onore* and *Non mir dir, bell' idolo mio*) Mozart equals, if he does not surpass Gluck in the tragic manner. Leporello's Catalogue Aria is as funny as anything in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Don's Serenade is a masterpiece of irony. Don Ottavio, Anna's fiance may be stodgy and dull as a character, but he sings two of the most beautiful tenor arias ever written.

One of the secrets of the greatness of *Don Giovanni* lies in the distribution of voices. Unlike the romantic composers Mozart preferred the baritone over the tenor, the exceptions being Belmonte in *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and Tamino in *The Magic Flute*. The Don is a baritone, one of the really challenging roles for a singing actor. The tenor is reserved for that respectable gentleman, Don Ottavio.

Donna Anna is a full fledged dramatic soprano, the precursor of Beethoven's *Leonora* and Wagner's *Isolde* and *Kundry*. What Wagner owed to Mozart in *Don Giovanni* is a study in itself. Donna Elvira is almost as dramatic a part as Donna Anna, but how differently written! The trio of women is completed by the little peasant girl, Zerlina, greatest of all soubrette roles. At the other end of the scale there is the honest Masetto as a perfect foil for that humorous rascal and time-server, Leporello, and the booming basso of the Commendatore and his Ghost. Don Ottavio is almost a nonentity but how beautifully he sings!

Perhaps the greatest thing about *Don Giovanni* is the pace at which it moves. Serious opera, as we know it, is a slow, dignified, statuesque form of art. *Don Giovanni*, for all the grand elements in it, is one of the swiftest works ever written for the lyric theatre. It is all of a piece, moreover, despite its extraordinary range of style.

That is why we can still understand how Goethe, with the critical perception of genius, could speak of it with a greater reverence than he reserved even for Beethoven.



Don Giovanni