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Melanie Gudesblatt
Cornell University

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Melanie Gudesblatt
Year III – Cornell University

The ubiquitous presence of the title role in Mozart and Da Ponte's collaborative opera, *Don Giovanni*, establishes the protagonist's critical importance to the development of both the plot and themes. Don Giovanni is the driving force of the opera; therefore, he commands the audience's attention. However, Don Giovanni is a problematic protagonist. As Jessica Waldoff summarizes, "Heroic though his defiance may seem, he stands in the place where a hero should be. Somehow reconciling what is heroic with its opposite, he combines villainy and heroism."¹ Although there is an element of heroism in his steadfast libertinism, his deplorable actions and perfidious character complicate his role as the dramaturgical hero. Indeed, if classical heroes are paragons of righteousness, Don Giovanni's moral degradation reveals contradictions to these attributes; some might venture to say that he is the antithesis of such a hero or even that he is a villain. Irreconcilable though these categories of dramatic character may seem, Mozart offers a compromise: Don Giovanni functions simultaneously as both a hero and anti-hero and thus resists filling any one definitive identity; this

¹ Jessica Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 178.

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permits him to successfully negotiate the entire spectrum of personalities, social classes and situations. Don Giovanni's chameleon-like ability to adapt and change suggests that although he functions within his society, he does not fulfill any traditional societal role.² Ultimately, this unusual versatility lends Don Giovanni the ability to perform multiple roles simultaneously and transcend traditional boundaries of classification. An exploration of Don Giovanni's villainous and heroic characteristics offers an explanation for his ability to manipulate various scenarios throughout the opera.

The opera's full title, "*Il dissoluto punito ossia Il Don Giovanni*" ("The Libertine Punished, or Don Giovanni") immediately identifies the protagonist's dishonorable nature. The opening scene confirms this assessment of Don Giovanni's character; he violates a noblewoman, Donna Anna, duels with and murders her father, the Commendatore, and subsequently escapes. In spite of his heinous crimes, Leporello, Don Giovanni's servant, confirms that his master's behaviour is completely consistent with his character. Leporello reproaches his master in his scene 2 recitative: "My dear master, you're leading a rogue's life!"³ Likewise, Leporello's famous "Catalogue Aria" is wholly dedicated to recounting the

² In his article, Thomas Bauman discusses the nature of Don Giovanni, citing his noble stature and the background of court culture as a necessity – "if only as his socioeconomic base of operations" – but ultimately recognizes Don Giovanni as a threat to all stability in the opera, stating that "Giovanni's misdeeds are all of a kind – those of the individual against order." Thomas Bauman, "The Three Trials of Don Giovanni," in *The Pleasures and Perils of Genius: Mostly Mozart*, 133-144, edited by Peter Ostwald and Leonard S. Zegans, (Madison: International Universities Press, Inc., 1993), 136-137.

³ Translation in W.A. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, translated and introduced by Ellen H. Bleiler, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1964), 95.

sexual conquests of his master. He enumerates Don Giovanni's 'successes' in numerical terms: "640 in Italy, 231 in Germany, 100 in France, 91 in Turkey, but in Spain, ah, in Spain 1003 so far."⁴ As musicologist Julian Rushton notes, "[Leporello] ends with the grossest innuendo: 'just so long as they wear a skirt, you know what will happen.'"⁵ True to Leporello's claim, Don Giovanni's seductive endeavors know no bounds. Though his brash pursuit of Zerlina – in front of her husband at her wedding, no less – exemplifies Don Giovanni's boldness, his prior seduction and subsequent dismissal of Donna Elvira best illustrates the depth of Don Giovanni's immorality. Donna Elvira describes the methodology behind Don Giovanni's art of seduction in her Act 1, scene 2 recitative:

You entered my house furtively, you managed to seduce my heart with the strength of your artfulness, with your promises and flatteries; you won my love, o cruel man! You declared me your wife, and then, breaking the sacred law of heaven and earth...after three days, you abandoned me...and perhaps as a punishment for loving you so much, you left me prey to remorse and weeping.⁶

True to form, Don Giovanni lacks compassion and ignores Donna Elvira's verbal offensive. A true hedonistic libertine,

⁴ Translation in Julian Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Translation in W.A. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Translated and introduced by Ellen H. Bleiler, 98 – 99.

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Don Giovanni lives not only for chasing and seducing women, but also degrades his victims as a means of flaunting his triumph. Don Giovanni, then, “[embodies] the masculine principle that cares for nothing but the exercise of dominating sexual power.”⁷ For instance, when Donna Elvira threatens to expose Don Giovanni and his crimes publicly, he encourages the other characters to adopt his condescending tone and dismiss her tirade as insignificant babbling. Ultimately, it is Don Giovanni himself who clarifies his life maxim, stating that, “It’s all love; whoever is faithful only to one is cruel to the others; I, who feel such ample sentiment in myself, love all of them; and since women don’t comprehend these things, they call my natural goodness deceit.”⁸ Self-important, Don Giovanni thus reveals his absolute belief in himself and in his ability to succeed.

Don Giovanni’s unwavering confidence exudes heroism. However, his *raison d’être* is neither altruistic nor righteous but rather egocentric. Don Giovanni articulates his self-indulgent mantra in the Act II aria “L’ultima prova dell’amor” singing what Rushton appropriately calls “Giovanni’s hedonistic exaltation: ‘Vivan le femmine, viva il buon vino, sostegno e Gloria d’umanità!’ ‘A toast to women, a toast to good wine, support and glory of mankind!’”⁹ Although distant from traditional heroic values, Don Giovanni nevertheless remains indefatigable even in the face of adversity. When, in the Finale of Act I, he is caught

⁷ Lawrence Lipking, “Donna Abbandonata,” in *Don Giovanni: Myths of Seduction and Betrayal*, edited by Jonathan Miller, (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 38.

⁸ Translation by Bleiler in W.A. Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, 151.

⁹ Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, 24.

forcibly seducing Zerlina for the second time, he is confronted by his opponents but refuses to recognize his misdeeds.¹⁰ His true moment of heroism, however, occurs in the Finale of Act II, when the ghastly apparition of the Commendatore issues an ultimatum: repent or face the consequences. Unlike Donna Elvira, the Commendatore presents a palpable danger to Don Giovanni, yet Don Giovanni still refuses to express remorse. The following exchange between Don Giovanni and the Commendatore testifies to the protagonist's defiance:

Commendatore: "Repent, change your life; it is your last moment."

Don Giovanni: "No, no, I'll not repent; get away from me!"

Commendatore: "Repent, villain!"

Don Giovanni: "No, old idiot!"¹¹

In this scene, Don Giovanni embodies the Romantic heroic ideal. Even with the imminent threat of eternal damnation, Don Giovanni refuses to compromise his 'principles,' a feat that E.T.A. Hoffman and other Romantic intellectuals considered "a triumphant human achievement."¹² Thus, Don Giovanni reaches an apex of unconventional heroism in these bleak moments, leading Rushton to conclude that, "one may deplore Giovanni's attitude; but one cannot help

¹⁰ Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, 175.

¹¹ Translation in Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, 25.

¹² Waldoff quotes E.T.A. Hoffman, writing that he viewed the act of "striving against the gods [to be a] triumphant human achievement." Quoted in Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, 168.

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but admire his almost superhuman courage.”¹³ Literally faced with a life-or-death ultimatum, Don Giovanni exudes audacious recalcitrance as he steadfastly clings to his lecherous code. Moral standards notwithstanding, the audience inevitably empathizes with this character who, faced with an insurmountable threat, does not abandon his beliefs but struggles to defend them even unto death.

Furthermore, despite our misgivings – or perhaps in spite of them – we not only identify with Don Giovanni and his plight, but are also drawn to his character and way of life. His captivating charm, which continues to seduce women throughout the opera, is not lost on the audience either. Attracted by his charisma, the audience is seduced by the *idea* of such a romanticized existence. Don Giovanni’s lawless life of freedom allows the audience to fulfill subconscious desires vicariously. In an article on Don Juan, the legendary Spaniard on which Da Ponte and Mozart’s Don Giovanni is based, Frank Sedwick discusses Don Giovanni’s unusual allure. Reflecting on Don Juan’s appeal, Sedwick states that “Don Juan means ‘lady’s man,’ a hero to be identified with the inner romantic life of each individual as a suppressed ideal, a man to be envied”¹⁴ a description that applies equally well to Mozart’s character. Don Giovanni’s depravity prevents us from relating to him in a conventional manner, but his lifestyle of sexual conquest and dangerous deception is irresistible within a dramatic, musical context. We simultaneously admire Don Giovanni’s brave self-confidence and begrudge him his haughtiness and idealized criminal life.

¹³ Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, 25.

¹⁴ Frank Sedwick, “El Burlador, Don Giovanni, and the Popular Concept of Don Juan,” *Hispania* 38, no. 2 (May 1955): 173-7, 173.

Mozart and Da Ponte emphasize Don Giovanni's unique heroic nature on multiple artistic levels, for example through the stubbornly recurring B-natural.¹⁵ This is due to the fact that Don Giovanni is much more than a singular character, but a representative archetype. Embodying "a manifestation of the...syndrome marked by narcissism and an unwillingness to accept or abide by the rule and responsibilities of an adult community," he is a "collective symbol," who exists on multiple plains.¹⁶ Thus, just like Don Giovanni's own recalcitrance, the B-natural 'disregards' the traditional rules of harmony. The B-natural functions in a similar capacity to Don Giovanni, marking the score with harmonic 'corruption' just as Don Giovanni leaves his indelible mark of libertinism on society. At salient musical moments, Mozart notates this note, often as the root of a diminished chord, in order to evade chordal resolution or create jarring discordance. This B-natural is first emphasized at the moment Don Giovanni fatally stabs the Commendatore, firmly linking his character with this musical motif (measure 175). Here, the B-natural is the root of the orchestral chord, which is further emphasized by a fermata and a *sforzando*. When Don Giovanni escapes minutes later, the music similarly avoids closure. Slipping chromatically to the B-natural, the music seamlessly elides the opening of Act I, "Notte e giorno faticar" with the

¹⁵ Both Jessica Waldoff and Julian Rushton cite examples of where this note crops up and allude to its interesting dramaturgical narrative role. Waldoff also discusses how certain 'keynotes' can be used to signal dramatic events (such as recognition). She argues that Mozart uses this same technique in *Idomeneo*. See Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, 44 – 79 and 165 – 183, and Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, 92 – 121.

¹⁶ Bauman, "The Three Trials of Don Giovanni," 138.

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following recitative without a satisfying tonal resolution.¹⁷ Nor is this note restricted to 'harmless' text painting. As Waldoff notes, this tense sonority punctuates the precise moment when Don Giovanni forces himself upon Zerlina in the Act I Finale.¹⁸ Zerlina cries out for help over a B-natural diminished chord, which is by now recognized as the musical trademark of Don Giovanni's uncompromising corruption. Despite her best attempts to rid herself of him, Zerlina ultimately falls prey – if only momentarily – to Don Giovanni's licentiousness, and is held captive by Don Giovanni's musical immorality.

Moreover, the B-natural represents more than just the degenerate character of Don Giovanni; it also symbolizes his doomed fate. The first accentuation of this note also seals Don Giovanni's fate; ultimately, it is this murderous act that precipitates Don Giovanni's untimely death. Appropriately, the B-natural's inauspiciously triumphant return mirrors that of the Commendatore in the penultimate scene (measure 433).¹⁹ The B-natural, here as the root of a diminished seventh chord, is especially emphasized and effective with the root in the bass and is now marked *fortissimo*. Mozart alters the ominous material from the opening of the opera, thereby recalling Don Giovanni's imminent fate through the symbolic implications of the musical score. Similarly, at the end of the opera, Mozart incorporates this note during Don Giovanni's arrogant dismissal of the Commendatore's ghost; as Don Giovanni begins his defensive, demanding to know the reason for the Commendatore's presence, the dissonant sonority of the B-natural occurs again (measure 471). Finally, as the

¹⁷ Bauman, "The Three Trials of Don Giovanni," 140.

¹⁸ Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, 174.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Commendatore offers Don Giovanni his last chance to repent, the B-natural is strongly emphasized by a sustained pedal (measures 474 – 477 and 491 – 492). Here, Mozart's orchestration lends this note yet another narrative layer; strategically placed in the trombones, an instrument commonly used to symbolize death, the B-natural further accentuates the dramatic actions. When the Commendatore demands Don Giovanni's final decision, the now familiar *forte* B-natural sounds once more as Don Giovanni seals his own fate by refusing to repent (measures 508 – 509). In a moment of long-awaited relief, this discordant note is at last symbolically 'corrected', sounding as a B-flat, which in turn resolves the hitherto unresolved dissonance (B-natural diminished seventh transforms into B-flat major seventh) just as the flames begin to engulf Don Giovanni (measures 561 – 565). Mozart makes the significance of this 'resolution' explicit, avoiding the symbolic dissonance after Don Giovanni's departure. There are a few notable exceptions, however; for instance, the B-natural appears repeatedly whenever Leporello speaks of his doomed master (measures 570, 585), reminding us of both Don Giovanni's immorality and his determination. Thus, Don Giovanni's grave B-naturals, which confound our sense of tonal stability, create musical tension in order to paint a vivid picture of his degenerate yet defiantly heroic character.

This dual character of Don Giovanni encompasses "what is most and least admirable in human nature"²⁰ and thus affords him great versatility. Like his unique type of

²⁰ Waldoff, *Recognition in Mozart's Operas*, 168.

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heroism, Don Giovanni's unusual social mobility is perhaps depicted most effectively through music. Despite his nominal nobility, Don Giovanni interacts with members of all social strata, ranging from the upper class (Don Ottavio and Donna Anna) to the opera's peasants (Masetto and Zerlina). Musically, the rhythmic and melodic figures correlate to these varying interactions, reflecting obvious class distinctions.²¹ In the first scene of the opera, the juxtaposition of characters highlights these social disparities. Here, Leporello's part in this opening aria, "Notte e giorno faticar," is permeated with simple eighth-notes and features diatonic motion and arpeggiations of the tonic; generally, as a member of the lower class, Leporello's vocal line features a slow harmonic rhythm and little modulation. However, when Donna Anna and the Commendatore enter, they have markedly more complex rhythms, such as dotted-quarters and fast moving eighths, as well as greater harmonic movement, exemplified by the chromatic steps throughout their musical material. Furthermore, their vocal leaps are more demanding, frequently extending past the basic thirds of the other characters' vocal lines.

Unlike the other characters, Don Giovanni is not limited to a distinctive musical style but rather imitates the specific musical characters of his companions. During the Act I quartet entitled "Non ti fidar, o misera" with Don Ottavio, Donna Anna and Donna Elvira, Don Giovanni sings in the

²¹ In his book Wye Jamison Allanbrook discusses how Mozart frequently distinguishes characters' social status musically, and of *Don Giovanni* writes, "Donna Anna, from the first sound she utters in act I... commands a plane far above the low *buffa* style of Leporello; their differing gestures preserve class differences rigidly." In Wye Jamison Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 100.

same high musical style as his company, and he does so with ease and fluency. At measure 40, Don Giovanni mirrors Donna Anna's vocal style, reproducing her descending chromatic line of dotted-eighth notes followed by sixteenth-notes one measure after she articulates the same pattern. Later in the first act finale, "Presto, presto, pria ch'ei venga," Don Giovanni mimics Zerlina and Masetto's musical lines. Zerlina and Masetto's duet is replete with typical eighth-note motion around a tonic triad. When Don Giovanni joins them to form a trio, he quickly adapts to their style (measure 52). His pattering vocal line suggests a lower-class technique, one that is fast-moving and mostly syllabic (measures 62 – 65).²² These examples are not exhaustive - Don Giovanni truly is a "rootless [and] placeless man,"²³ effortlessly transitioning throughout social spheres, changing his personality to fit his company.

Don Giovanni's adaptability, however, makes it difficult for the audience to penetrate his individual character. Not only does he assume the role of musical chameleon, constantly adapting to those around him, he lacks a self-reflective aria. Despite the typical dramatic function of the aria as a time for meditation and the expression of inner thoughts, such dramaturgical tools are less useful in exposing Don Giovanni's character. His so-called "champagne aria" ("Fin ch'an dal vino") briefly illuminates

²² Over the course of his book, Allanbrook establishes "patter" as a strictly *buffa* technique, one that exists on a much lower plane than the stylistic trademarks of *seria*. He defines "*buffa* patter" through association with other musical techniques, writing that in a *buffa* section, "rather than a continuous and lyric development of themes one finds a mélange of short broken motives, recitative-like material and *buffa* patter." In Allanbrook, *Rhythmic Gesture in Mozart: Le nozze di Figaro and Don Giovanni*, 120.

²³ *Ibid.*, 322.

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his personality, confirming his libertine attitude and unconventional moral constraints. However, the aria's relative brevity suggests the possibility that Don Giovanni's proclamations are yet another ruse put on for the audience. As summarized by Rushton, "We have no sense of what he is like when he is by himself."²⁴ We, as listeners, witness his effortless adaptability so frequently that all of our encounters with him, whether he is masquerading around in public or indulging in a solitary moment of narcissism, are perceived in view of his unreliability. Indeed, his constant mutation and charming guile make it nearly impossible for us to identify the true nature of his character.

Perhaps the most telling instance of this is the three simultaneous dances of the Act I finale. Orchestrated by Don Giovanni, the six principle characters perform three separate dances in three different meters simultaneously: Donna Anna and Don Ottavio dance a Minuet in $\frac{3}{4}$; Zerlina and Don Giovanni, a contredanse in $\frac{2}{4}$; Leporello and Masetto, a Teitsch in $\frac{3}{8}$ (measures 406 – 467). The dances symbolize the social distinctions between the characters. Strikingly, the musical turmoil one might expect from Mozart's superimposition of the three disparate dances never materializes; in fact, they are not only integrated but even musically satisfying. This musical flexibility is reminiscent of Don Giovanni's adaptable character, which simultaneously distinguishes and unites different social classes and musical styles. Like the combined dances, he disrupts the conventional fabric of the music, but he continues to function within it. Harmoniously integrated, the dances paint a musical portrait of Don Giovanni: the

²⁴ Rushton, *W.A. Mozart: Don Giovanni*, 82.

musical *mélange* is socially flexible, musically varied, and encompasses multiple personalities and styles.

As a 'heroic' protagonist moving fluidly throughout social hierarchies, Don Giovanni is largely responsible for driving the plot. This amalgamation of heroic and anti-heroic qualities represents a new type of protagonist, one who is central to the plot but lacks the moral traits of a classic hero. Donington describes this unique character:

Don Juan, Don Giovanni if you are an Italian or an opera-goer...[is recognized by two features]. He is the insatiable womanizer; and he is the hero who, when confronted by some deadly emanation from the underworld evoked by his womanizing, has the effrontery or the courage to grasp it more or less literally by the hand.²⁵

Combining aspects of aristocracy and peasantry, righteousness and amorality, Don Giovanni's character does not exist in a society bound by rigid classification and structure. Mozart and Da Ponte's Don Giovanni is a unique character whose ability to evade societal categorizations while simultaneously functioning within society is central to his charismatic appeal.

²⁵ Robert Donington, "Don Giovanni Goes to Hell," *The Musical Times* 122, no. 1661 (Jul. 1981): 446-8, 446.

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