

1 Introduction

Unique individuals as they are, not one of Mozart's great operas is without precedent, and *Don Giovanni* has complex relationships with two of its immediate predecessors. One is *Le nozze di Figaro*, the first completed collaboration of Mozart and Lorenzo da Ponte, performed in Vienna on 1 May 1786. The other is the *Don Giovanni* of Giovanni Bertati, performed at the S. Moisè theatre in Venice on 5 February 1787 with music by Giuseppe Gazzaniga. Some forty years on and in a new world, da Ponte claimed to have chosen the Don Juan legend as material peculiarly suited to Mozart's many-sided genius. He forgot to mention the existence of a new libretto, emanating from Venice where he had spent much of his hot youth and where, although he was now *persona non grata*, he retained contacts; but it was doubtless not without influence upon his choice (see note on p. 152).

Even as the Gazzaniga opera was being performed in Venice, Mozart was being fêted in Prague where, only a few months after its modest success in Vienna, *Figaro* was all the rage. Mozart wrote to Gottfried von Jacquin on 15 January 1787 of his own rather sober behaviour at a party:

However, I was very delighted to look upon all these people leaping about in sheer delight to the music of my *figaro*, adapted for noisy contredances and waltzes [teutsche]; – for here nothing is discussed but – *figaro*; nothing is played, blowed, sung or whistled but – *figaro*: no opera is succeeding but – *figaro* and eternally *figaro*; certainly a great honour for me.¹

On this visit, Mozart launched his 'Prague' symphony K.504, and directed a performance of *Figaro* on 20 January. When he left Prague on 8 February he had been invited to compose a new opera for the autumn season. The impresario, Pasquale Bondini, would obviously want more of the ingredients which had endeared *Figaro* to the public: melodious arias, involved ensembles, colourful orchestration, brilliant finales. Da Ponte and Mozart must have seen the possibilities of the

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Excerpt

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Don Juan material for similar treatment, cheerfully accepting unoriginality of subject in such promising circumstances.

Work on *Don Giovanni* extended over about twelve months before the first Vienna performance in May 1788. After his return from Prague Mozart composed among other works the two great string quintets in C and G minor (K.515 and K.516), and he made a set of three by adapting his C minor wind serenade as a quintet (K.516b/406). From May 1787 dates the great piano-duet sonata K.521. On 28 May Leopold Mozart died in Salzburg; but, whereas his mother's death in Paris in 1778 had considerably disturbed his compositional rhythm, Mozart apparently took his father's death in his stride. Yet this father-son relationship was intense and uneasy; it is deeply ingrained in an earlier opera (*Idomeneo*), and it may be that the impact of this death tapped some dark force in Mozart's creativity which welled up in *Don Giovanni*. Mozart's next works, however, might be considered insulting to the dead. On 4 June he wrote a poem to his dead starling, and later that month he finished his 'musical joke', K.522. In August he wrote the elegant *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* and his last piano and violin sonata, K.526. These works seem quite detached from the opera whose composition they must have interrupted; and since no letters or other sources inform us about its progress, legend had it for a long time that the entire work was set down in Prague in three weeks or so before the première. However, a recently discovered letter of Mozart's to his brother-in-law, dated 29 September, indicates that he only began the three-day journey to Prague on 1 October. The date of the first performance was then expected to be 14 October; it was to coincide with the honeymoon visit to Prague of the Archduchess Maria Theresia and Prince Anton Clemens of Saxony. Even the Mozart of legend would hardly have left himself only ten days to compose and stage an opera. It was around this journey that Eduard Mörike constructed his charming fiction *Mozart auf der Reise nach Prag* (1855).

More prosaic evidence about the composition is to be found in the papers used in Mozart's autograph manuscript.² Most scholars assume that the 'Vienna' paper was used in that city, and the smaller 'Prague' paper indicates precisely what was composed after Mozart's journey; but of course 'Prague' paper might only have been resorted to after supplies brought from Vienna had been exhausted. Nevertheless the general picture is clear. Most of *Don Giovanni* was completed in Vienna and some was sent ahead to Prague. Opinions differ as to how much was set down in Prague; it certainly included much of the recitative, which Mozart would always leave until the principal numbers had been

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composed (and which therefore sometimes appears on spare pages of 'Vienna' paper). Such comic business as the recitative before the graveyard duet, and the supper music in the second finale, evolved partly through on-the-spot improvisation, a speciality of the *buffo* personnel at Prague. The list of numbers certainly written in Prague is: Overture, No. 6 (Masetto's aria), No. 14 (duet), and the second finale. It seems that nothing was added in Prague which did not form part of the plan of the opera worked out in advance in Vienna.³ Mozart may have been late in finishing, but the double postponement of the première was not his fault. He accounted for it in a letter to Jacquin written on three days not available for rehearsals:

[15 October] No doubt you think my opera is over by now – but – there you've missed the mark; for one thing the local troupe is not as clever as they are in Vienna at studying a piece like this in so little time. Secondly, when I arrived I found hardly any advance work and organization, so it would have been quite impossible to give it on the 14th, i.e. yesterday. So yesterday they gave my *figaro* . . . *Don Giovanni* is now fixed for the 24th; – [21 October] It was fixed for the 24th, but one of the *donne* fell ill and it had to be put off again; – as the company is so small, the impresario is in a continual flap, having to nurse his people as much as he can, in case some sudden illness should fling him into the plightiest of plights, not being able to mount any show at all! – so everything goes slow here because the singers (from laziness) won't rehearse on opera days, and the entrepreneur (from fright and flap) won't insist . . . [25 October] This is the eleventh day that I've been scribbling this letter . . . the opera will be performed for the first time this coming Monday, the 29th . . .

Of all the legends connected with *Don Giovanni*, the most enduring, perhaps because it may even be true, is that the Overture was not composed until the night before the performance, and that on 29 October it was sight-read with the ink still wet on the orchestral parts. Several authorities insist that it was the penultimate night, and that the famous achievement of the Prague orchestra took place at the final rehearsal. The question is hardly one which deserves to generate much heat. Mozart entered the opening of the Overture (inaccurately) in his catalogue and dated it 28 October, the day before the performance, but this proves nothing.⁴

In Prague Mozart stayed at the inn 'Bei drei goldenen Löwen' but spent much time, and wrote some of the music, at the Villa Bertramka belonging to his friends the Duscheks (now a Mozart museum). Da Ponte arrived on 8 October and stayed at the inn 'Zum Platteis', where he could talk with Mozart through the windows without either having

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to leave his room. The last details of the libretto will have been settled then, in readiness for printing, and da Ponte supervised some rehearsals. However, like the royal couple, he had to leave Prague before the première. Mozart directed the first four performances; the opera was very well received, even if it never created such a *furor* as *Figaro*. Mozart left for Vienna on 13 November. On the fifteenth Gluck died, and on 7 December Mozart was appointed imperial *Kammernusikus* in his stead, at less than half the salary. However, 800 florins annually compares well with the fees for *Don Giovanni*: in Prague, 100 ducats (450 florins) and in Vienna, 225 florins (da Ponte received about half these sums). *Don Giovanni* represents far more work than Mozart was ever asked to do for his official appointment.

In the months following his Prague visit Mozart's output was not large. Apart from a handful of songs and dances, he composed in Prague an aria for his hostess Josepha Duschek ('*Bella mia fiamma*', K.528). In Vienna he composed three of his finest movements for solo piano – the allegro and andante K.533 which form a sonata in F with the rondo K.494, and the B minor adagio K.540 – and his penultimate piano concerto, K.537. At the end of April he composed two arias, a duet, and the necessary recitatives for the Vienna production of *Don Giovanni* (No. 10a, dated 24 April; No. 21a, dated 28 April; No. 21b, dated 30 April), thus finishing just a week before the first performance on 7 May. The work was prepared with great speed, and was mounted by special order of the Emperor Joseph II, the protector of da Ponte and, although he did not really like his music, of Mozart also. His orders were necessary to overcome intrigue, but he was away at the Turkish war and saw only the last performance of the year, which was also the last in Vienna in Mozart's lifetime, on 15 December. Da Ponte's description of these performances is quite inaccurate, since he implies that the Emperor saw an early performance, and that the new music was composed after an unsuccessful première. Almost certainly the only alterations made between May and December were cuts, and the second authentic version of *Don Giovanni*, therefore, was in existence at the end of April. By August Mozart had composed not only two trios and various keyboard works, but his last three symphonies as well.

Since 1788 the career of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* has been almost as notorious as that of its protagonist. It is the second opera (*Figaro* is the first) to have remained continuously in the repertory; but unlike its elder sibling *Don Giovanni* was frequently so distorted as to be barely recognizable. Even today, when Mozart's other mature operas suffer no

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worse indignity than the omission of a few dramatically superfluous arias, *Don Giovanni* is regularly performed and recorded in an inauthentic form, an amalgam of the Prague and Vienna versions which tries to include everything except No. 21a and a few recitatives (see below, Chapter 4, 'The two authentic versions'). Critical exegesis of *Don Giovanni* is as plentiful as, and even more diverse than, that of *Die Zauberflöte*, and even the latter scarcely presents greater problems of staging and interpretation.⁵ My debt to recent scholarly work will be apparent throughout, particularly to the edition of *Don Giovanni* by Wolfgang Plath and Wolfgang Rehm for the Neue Mozart Ausgabe, and to Christoph Bitter's *Wandlungen in den Inszenierungsformen des 'Don Giovanni'*; the work of the late Alfred Einstein is also of crucial importance to the student of this opera (see Select Bibliography). It is scarcely possible in a book of this size to do justice to the literature and performing history, which, indeed, are sometimes interwoven, for the influence of literature on stage interpretation goes back at least as far as E. T. A. Hoffmann. Unfortunately it was impossible to include a separate essay on the problems of staging *Don Giovanni*, but they are frequently touched on in the course of the book. One of the most sensitive of modern Mozart producers, Sir Peter Hall, is studied at work on the 1977 Glyndebourne production in John Higgins' *The Making of an Opera*. *Don Giovanni* has also been made into a film by Joseph Losey.

One question may be dealt with briefly here. There is no reason to suppose that any ambiguity of plot, genre, or meaning was intended by the authors, and the designation *dramma giocoso* applied to *Don Giovanni* by da Ponte cannot be used as evidence of any such intention. By this date it probably meant no more than the commoner term *opera buffa*. Da Ponte applied it also to *Così*, but Mozart entered both works as *opera buffa* in his personal catalogue. Da Ponte's American physician, Dr Francis, reported that 'Mozart determined to cast the opera exclusively as serious, and had well advanced in the work. Da Ponte assured me that he remonstrated and urged the expediency on the great composer of the introduction of the *vis comica*, in order to accomplish a greater success, and prepared the role with "Batti, batti", "Là ci darem", etc.'⁶ Since prior versions of the subject used by da Ponte all include characters like Zerlina, and in view of the probable nature of the commission, for a successor to *Figaro*, this seems a most unlikely story. Nevertheless it would be bigoted to deny that *Don Giovanni* contains serious, even tragic, elements. It has been pointed out that *dramma giocoso* was originally used, at least by Goldoni, to mean an *opera buffa* which combined serious roles with comic (*parti serie* with *parti buffe*);

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the *parti serie* did not compete with the *buffe* in ensembles and finales (whereas in Mozart they do).⁷ There was also an intermediate type, *parti di mezzo carattere*, ranging from seriousness to farce. Some years earlier Mozart had conceived the idea of an *opera buffa* with these three kinds of role. He writes to his father that he has read through a hundred libretti without finding anything suitable. There is a promising poet in Vienna called da Ponte, but he seems to be in league with Salieri; in desperation, he thinks of Varesco, the Salzburg abbé who wrote *Idomeneo*; will Leopold impress on him that 'the most important thing is that as a whole it must be really comic and if possible should have 2 equally good *female roles* (frauenzimmer Rollen) – one must be *Seria*, but the other *Mezzo Carattere* – but in quality – both roles must be quite equal. – The third female role, however, can be quite *Buffa*, and so if necessary can all the men' (7 May 1783). Anna, Elvira, and Zerlina fill these categories far more exactly than the women in any other Mozart opera, although one of the men, Ottavio, is also predominantly a *seria* role.

Whether or not we believe, as Mozart did, that in opera music is supreme and the poetry but its 'obedient daughter', the study of an opera must start with the libretto. Most 'problems' of *Don Giovanni* arise there, since it is not a closely knit intrigue like *Figaro* or *Così* but an ingenious compilation from literary, popular, and musical predecessors. Unfortunately we know nothing about Mozart's personal involvement in its construction. Da Ponte is as silent on this as on his debt to Bertati. Doubtless Mozart was closely involved, as we know him to have been on other occasions. There is a tendency to credit him with any good ideas, but to blame da Ponte for the defects that remain. The critics cannot have it both ways, and if the libretto is defective, Mozart must either take some of the blame or be assumed not to have bothered himself with it – which would be blameworthy indeed. Nevertheless it is emphatically not da Ponte's choice and treatment of the subject which have provoked the commentators, men of letters, and philosophers, but the music. It is not Tirso, nor Molière, nor Goldoni, nor da Ponte, who arouse such interest in the personalities involved that studies of some of them have attained the proportions of a short biography. It is Mozart; and his, too, is the responsibility for the seriousness with which we take many of the situations, and for the demonic element so often detected in *Don Giovanni*, which is something quite different from the pantomime devilry so often associated with the subject. Mozart is thus the catalyst whose influence changed the subject from the proper interest of Latin Europe and Catholic morality, and from the status of both vul-

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gar and enlightened entertainment, to the proper interest of Northern, Faustian philosophy. With *Die Zauberflöte* no serious commentator could fail to conclude that the comedy is a cheerful enhancement of a fundamentally serious work. With *Don Giovanni* the issue is by no means so clear, and therein lies much of its fascination. Its influence on literature and philosophy is unmatched by any opera before Wagner; yet, at bottom, it is not the embodiment of a philosophy, nor a moral tract, but an *opera buffa*.

2 *Synopsis*

Scarcely any published synopsis of *Il dissoluto punito o sia Il Don Giovanni* is altogether free of errors or unwarrantable glosses. I can hardly hope to succeed where so many have failed, but the following is presented with the simple aim of accurately representing the action as da Ponte and Mozart seem to have intended it. If the reader finds unexpected details or lacunae, it may be because he is accustomed to the accretions of nearly two centuries of mistranslation and a 'tradition' of interpretation which departed very rapidly from the atmosphere in which *Don Giovanni* was created (see below, pp. 68 ff). Problems of timing and action, including some well-established traditions which are not necessarily wrong but which should be recognized as lacking authority, are discussed in Chapter 4. The principal sources for a synopsis must be the very rare authentic libretti published for the Prague (1787) and Vienna (1788) performances, the preliminary libretto of 1787 (see below, Chapter 1, n. 3), and the text as it appears in Mozart's autograph. The Neue Mozart Ausgabe score distinguishes typographically between stage-directions from different sources. Such directions are particularly full in the Prague libretto, and several are traditionally omitted; they are incorporated or paraphrased here, since their authority is undoubted. Where the Prague and Vienna versions diverge, they are given in parallel columns. In scene-headings, material in square brackets is editorial; un-attributed commentary in round brackets and in inverted commas is Leporello's, except in No. 10 (Act I Scene 13), where Ottavio is speaking.

Dramatis personae

Don Giovanni	A young and extremely licentious nobleman	Baritone
Donna Anna	A lady, betrothed to	Soprano
Don Ottavio		Tenor
The Commendatore	[Father to Donna Anna]	Bass

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Donna Elvira	A lady from Burgos, abandoned by Don Giovanni	Soprano
Leporello	Don Giovanni's servant	Bass
Masetto	[Peasant] in love with	Bass
Zerlina	Country girl	Soprano

Chorus of peasants and girls; servants; subterranean chorus

Stage instrumentalists

The action takes place in a city in Spain

Act I*Overture (Andante – allegro)*

This is Mozart's closest approach to Gluck's practice of involving the overture with the action. It opens with the music for the stone guest (Act II, No. 24.5), modified in details: because there are no voices, the orchestral articulation is more precise, and the trombones are withheld for the actual apparition. This *andante* may well strike awe in the hearer, and so reverberate in his mind to prepare for the inevitable termination of Giovanni's adventures. It was the first time Mozart had used a slow introduction for an overture; he was to do so again in *Così* and *Die Zauberflöte*. The *allegro* begins with the bustling accompaniment and sprightly fanfare which are the normal stuff of overtures. The main theme, with its partly chromatic upward thrust, is so original that it has often been taken to portray the protagonist. It does not appear in the opera, so this interpretation cannot be confirmed; but the electrifying rhythms and swift transitions of mood make such an interpretation of the whole *allegro* very plausible. Other glosses, for example 'explaining' the prominent five-note falling motif introduced in the dominant as Justice in pursuit of the rascal, are merely fanciful, and are reminiscent of the nineteenth-century habit of composing programmatic overtures, a procedure which there is no likelihood of Mozart's having contemplated; the adventurous development of this figure could just as well be regarded as lively play, and thus as eminently Giovanni-esque. The *allegro* is a fully-fledged sonata form (whereas in *Figaro* Mozart had dispensed with a central development). For coda, however, Mozart devised a transition which leads directly into the first scene; it is a late development of the five-note figure, and the harmony takes us from D major towards the F major of 'Notte e giorno faticar'. There exists an authentic ending in D major, only two bars longer; its purpose is unclear. Longer, spurious concert-endings are still sometimes heard.

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First tableau

[Half stage] Night, a garden [possibly enclosed; belonging to the Commendatore's house].

Scene 1 No. 1 INTRODUCTION (*Molto allegro*. Leporello: 'Notte e giorno faticar'). Leporello, cloaked, is on sentry duty, whiling away the time with his eternal complaint: he must watch night and day while his master takes his pleasure. Why cannot *he* play the gentleman? He hears someone coming and hides. Giovanni enters pursued by Anna, who is holding on to him and trying to uncover his face. He angrily tries to shake her off, calling her crazy and saying that she will never learn who he is. Leporello cowers; but his anxiety comes close to dominating the trio, preserving the *opera buffa* tone which he has already established. Anna hears her father coming; she releases her attacker and goes indoors. The Commendatore accosts Giovanni and forces him to fight, but is quickly overcome by his agile opponent. In a short trio (*andante*) the Commendatore gasps out his life, Leporello stands horrified, and Giovanni, who had at first refused to fight such an unequal battle, himself seems shocked, even a little moved. **Scene 2 (Recitative)**. Giovanni calls Leporello, who asks 'Are you dead, or is it the old man?' and coarsely applauds: 'Bravo! two fine deeds, seducing the daughter and killing the father.' He is nearly beaten for his impertinence – Giovanni recovers easily from shock – and they slip away. **Scene 3** Ottavio, Anna, and servants enter with lights. To the dry practicality of their search succeeds a searing orchestral dissonance as Anna sees the body. **No. 2 DUET (Recitativo obbligato)**. Anna: 'Ma qual mai s'offre, oh Dei, spettacolo funesto agli occhi miei!'). She falls on the body, finding blood, but no breath; its limbs are cold. She faints. Ottavio, anxious but practical, calls for assistance (smelling-salts, spirits), and orders the body to be removed. With characteristic impetuosity he is already saying 'Console yourself. . . take heart', and this, with the invitation to marry him which, in effect, follows, will be his refrain throughout the opera. Anna revives (*Allegro*. Anna: 'Fuggi, crudele'). She seems to reject Ottavio, but possibly mistakes him for her father's murderer: 'Fly, cruel man, and let me die too, now that he who gave me life is dead.' Ottavio brings her to her senses, and she begs his forgiveness, and asks for her father. His reply ('You have both husband and father in me') is eloquent, although possibly a little out of place at such a moment; her response is a demand for vengeance. He swears by her eyes and by their love, and the scene ends sombrely with their voices united in some awe at this oath.