

Class Notes

Class 17, Thurs March 28

Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

With Mozart we get the first really mature, mainstream operas that are standard repertory for most opera fans. A lot of the credit actually belongs to one of Mozart's librettists, Lorenzo da Ponte, who helped him adapt controversial material with a depth and complexity that opera had never seen before. (In class, I compare da Ponte to Shakespeare, because his works give each character some amount of dignity rather than just using stereotypes and caricatures. As a result, you get to see things from all points of view, not just one.)

Mozart wrote 22 operas over the course of his career, though some of these are just short, silly works that he composed as a teenager. His final four works are considered all-time classics and are frequently performed. The first three are in Italian, and written with da Ponte:

Le nozze di Figaro [1786] (The Marriage of Figaro)

Don Giovanni [1787]

Così fan tutte [1790] (So Do They All)

You could call all three of these works "social satires." His final opera (and one of his final works) is in German and quite different. It takes place in a sort of fantasy world with magic, dragons, bird-people, etc.

Die Zauberflöte [1791] (The Magic Flute)

(...though just below the surface the Magic Flute is actually an allegory about the Freemasons, a somewhat mysterious and controversial organization that Mozart joined in 1784.)

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* [1787]

Don Giovanni is a comic opera – it has some silly situations, a lot of sarcasm and irony, a lower-class character who constantly criticizes his noble master, and it often has the quicker pacing of comedy. However, the subject matter is also very dark – *Don Giovanni* is a version of the Don Juan character, a powerful man whose main goal in life is to sleep with as many women as he can. He does this through a mixture of sexual assault, deception, and abuse of his powerful position.

(Thus, the opera is similar to *Breaking Bad*, which also treated an essentially unfunny subject with irony and humor. The Don Giovanni/Leporello relationship is even a lot like the Mr. White/Jesse pairing.)

In class we watched an edited-down version of Act I. To get started I gave you a quick list of important characters:

Don Giovanni – he is of course the main character. He is a nobleman who seems to have unlimited leisure time to pursue his sexual agenda.

Leporello – this is the servant / sidekick. He is often off to the side of the action, making jokes.

Donna Anna – this is the woman who Don Giovanni attacks in the very first scene. She and her fiancée actually have a few scenes in the opera, but I have edited most of them out for time. They are supposed to be somewhat “middle class.”

The Commendatore – This is Donna Anna’s father. His title would translate to “Commander” – apparently this was a prestigious rank in Italian society. He rushes out to defend Donna Anna’s honor in the first scene, with dire consequences.

Donna Elvira – We meet Donna Elvira in the middle of Act I. She is an aristocratic woman who had a brief affair with Giovanni, and thinks that they are married. She has come looking for him and disrupts some of his schemes.

Zerlina and Masetto – this a peasant couple who are getting married. Giovanni arrives during the pre-wedding festivities and tries to seduce Zerlina.

We will take one class to watch much of Act I, and then revisit the opera for a shorter look at Act II. Every time we watch this I am struck by how well the music serves the drama, and how relevant this work is to our contemporary world.