**Don Giovanni** [*Il dissoluto punito, ossia Il Don Giovanni* (‘The Libertine Punished, or Don Giovanni’)]**(ii)**

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*Opera buffa* in two acts, K527, by [Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart](https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/documentId/omo-9781561592630-e-5000007498) to a libretto by [Lorenzo Da Ponte](https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/documentId/omo-9781561592630-e-5000005166); Prague, National Theatre, 29 October 1787.

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| Don Giovanni *a young and extremely licentious nobleman* | baritone |
| Commendatore | bass |
| Donna Anna *his daughter* | soprano |
| Don Ottavio *her betrothed* | tenor |
| Donna Elvira *a lady from Burgos* | soprano |
| Leporello *Giovanni’s servant* | bass |
| Masetto *a peasant, betrothed to Zerlina* | bass |
| Zerlina *a peasant girl* | soprano |
| Peasants, servants, demons |  |
| *Setting* A Spanish town (traditionally Seville), in the 16th century |

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The commission for Don Giovanni followed the triumphant production of *Le nozze di Figaro* in Prague (December 1786). The impresario Guardasoni probably asked Mozart to expand Bertati’s one-act *Don Giovanni*, set by Gazzaniga for Venice in February 1787. Da Ponte’s memoirs suppressed his indebtedness but he improved Bertati in every respect and drew on other sources, notably Molière’s *Dom Juan* and versions from popular theatre. About half the libretto, between the Act 1 quartet and the graveyard scene, is original.

Mozart began work during the summer, leaving for Prague on 1 October. This season in the Bohemian capital has the flavour of legend; but there is no reason to suppose that Mozart’s compositional processes were abnormal, even in the late composition of the overture (on the eve of the performance, already twice postponed, or of the final rehearsal). He may have had to resist Bassi’s demand for a big aria, and possibly did not know Baglioni when he composed ‘Il mio tesoro’.

Mozart surely had in mind production in Vienna with the personnel of the original *Figaro*. The two casts are listed together:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | *Prague 1787* |  | *Vienna 1788* |
| Leporello |  | Felice Ponziani |  | Francesco Benucci |
| Anna |  | Teresa Saporiti |  | Aloysia Lange |
| Giovanni |  | Luigi Bassi |  | Francesco Albertarelli |
| Commendatore/Masetto |  | Giuseppe Lolli |  | Francesco Bussani |
| Ottavio |  | Antonio Baglioni |  | Francesco Morella |
| Elvira |  | Caterina Micelli |  | Caterina Cavalieri |
| Zerlina |  | Caterina Bondini |  | Luisa Mombelli/Therese Teyber |

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The new triumph in Prague was not repeated in Vienna, although *Don Giovanni* received more performances than *Figaro* had done in 1786. Mozart wrote a replacement aria for Ottavio, an additional *scena* for Elvira, so that her role became approximately equal to Anna’s, and a *buffo* duet for Mombelli and Benucci. The final scene, after Giovanni’s disappearance, may have been omitted.

Don Giovanni soon acquired a reputation for exceptional difficulty, derived from the superimposed dance metres of the first finale and the unprecedented harmonic richness of the second. Guardasoni gave it in Warsaw in 1789; and it made rapid progress in Germany as a Singspiel, becoming after *Die Entführung* the Mozart opera most performed in his lifetime. At least three translations were used: by H. G. Schmieder (Mainz and Frankfurt, early 1789); C. G. Neefe (Mannheim and Bonn, also in 1789); and F. L. Schröder, in four acts (Hamburg 1789; Berlin 1790). German was used in Prague in 1791, Vienna in 1792, and outside Germany in Amsterdam (1793) and St Petersburg (1797). *Don Giovanni* became popular in France, often in adapted versions (in French, arranged C. Kalkbrenner, 1805; in Italian, 1811; in both languages thereafter). An attempt at Florence in 1792 seems to have been frustrated by the first finale; the Italian première was at Bergamo in 1811, followed that year by Rome. In England there is some doubt over the earliest performances, which may have been partly amateur affairs. In 1817 it appeared at rival theatres in Italian and in English; it remained popular in both languages. The first American performances, in 1826, were by García’s company in association with Da Ponte. Nearly every opera singer of note has been associated with one of the main roles, and 19th- and 20th-century productions are too numerous to detail.

The overture begins with the imposing music for the entrance of the ‘stone guest’. Its emergence into the D major Allegro establishes the ambivalence of the opera, its perilous balance of humour and tragedy. The full sonata form has been interpreted as a portrait of Giovanni, or as justice (the heavy five-note figure) pursuing the mercurial seducer. There is no final cadence; the coda modulates to a new key (F major) for the opening scene.

**Synopsis**

**ACT 1 Courtyard of the Commendatore’s house; night**

Leporello is always on guard (*Introduzione*, ‘Notte e giorno faticar’), but indulges in fantasy (‘Voglio far il gentiluomo’). He hides at the approach of Anna, pursuing Giovanni (who conceals his face); the music is still formal despite its growing intensity (as often hereafter, Leporello comments in the background). Anna’s father confronts Giovanni; musical formality yields to disordered gesture as they fight. The old man dies at a rare moment of stillness, even Giovanni being moved (in the short trio in F minor, he has a melody formerly sung by Anna in a faster tempo). Giovanni and Leporello escape. Anna returns and faints over the body (obbligato recitative and duet, ‘Fuggi, crudele’); reviving, she responds to Ottavio’s tender invitation to take him as husband and father by demanding an oath of vengeance. Their voices unite in powerful D minor cadences which form the first decisive closure of the opera.

**A street*;*dawn**

Elvira, in travelling clothes, is pursuing her betrayer (aria, ‘Ah, chi mi dice mai’); her sincere, slightly ridiculous pose is conveyed by a sweeping melodic line and formal orchestral gestures. Giovanni scents adventure; recognition comes too late to prevent his unctuous advance, which covers the cadence of the aria. He escapes her reproaches, leaving Leporello to show her the catalogue (aria, ‘Madamina, il catalogo è questo’). Giovanni’s conquests total 640 in Italy, 230 in Germany, 100 in France, 91 in Turkey, but in Spain, 1003. Bubbling patter is succeeded by a luscious minuet as Leporello details the types of women who have yielded; although willing to take anybody, Giovanni prefers the young beginner (an orchestral and tonal shiver underlines this depravity).

**[Mid-morning]**

Peasants invade the stage (a bucolic G major chorus). Attracted to the bride, Zerlina, Giovanni invites them all to his house. He dismisses the jealous Masetto, who upbraids Zerlina in an action aria (‘Ho capito, signor, sì’) before being dragged away. Giovanni flatters Zerlina with an offer of marriage (duettino, ‘La ci darem la mano’). ‘Vorrei, e non vorrei’: held by the hand, and following his melodic lead, Zerlina still worries about Masetto, but her impending submission is not in doubt. Their voices join in a pastorale (‘Andiam mio bene’). Elvira’s homily to Zerlina (‘Ah fuggi il traditor’) is a very short aria of Baroque vigour and formality, ending with strident coloratura. Anna and Ottavio greet Giovanni as a friend; the devil is frustrating his every plan, but he offers his assistance with exaggerated courtesy. Elvira interrupts again; recognizing a social equal, she tells Anna in measured tones not to trust Giovanni (quartet, ‘Non ti fidar, o misera’). Anna and Ottavio are puzzled; Giovanni tries to hush Elvira and explains that she is mad. In the course of a finely wrought ensemble her denunciation grows more vehement, even shameless. Giovanni’s farewell is too effusive; Anna realizes, and explains to Ottavio, that it was he who tried to seduce her the previous night. Her harrowing description (obbligato recitative) revives the orchestral turbulence of the music after her father’s death; her aria in D major (‘Or sai chi l’onore’) bespeaks her valiant determination to avenge her father. Ottavio can hardly believe Giovanni’s villainy, but his role is to support Anna. (His exquisite aria, ‘Della sua pace’ K540*a*, was added for Vienna.) Giovanni congratulates Leporello on disposing of Elvira and prepares for a brilliant afternoon’s work (aria, ‘Fin ch’han dal vino’); wine will warm them up, they will mix the minuet, follia and allemande, and ten names will enter the catalogue.

***Giovanni’s garden [afternoon]***

In Mozart’s most enchanting melodic vein, with cello obbligato, Zerlina wins Masetto back (aria, ‘Batti, batti’; like ‘Là ci darem’ it begins in 2/4 and ends in a honeyed 6/8). When she hears Giovanni’s voice she is too obviously aroused. The finale begins as Giovanni gives orders to his servants; then, espying Zerlina as she tries to hide, he resumes his blandishments. Masetto pops out of hiding; to the sound of a contredanse they go inside. Elvira leads Anna and Ottavio, masked, towards Giovanni’s lair. Leporello sees them (the minuet is heard from the window), and they are invited in. Their short prayer accompanied by wind (‘Protegga il giusto ciel’) is a moment of stillness at the heart of one of Mozart’s most active finales.

**The ballroom**

To music resembling the earlier bucolic chorus, Giovanni and Leporello entertain the peasants. Masetto urges prudence. The central key-change from E♭ to C, resplendent with trumpets, greets the masked trio with the acclamation ‘Viva la libertà!’. Now in G major, in a tour de force using three small stage bands, the ball resumes. The minuet is danced by Anna and Ottavio; on it is superimposed the contredanse in 2/4 with the same pulse (the ‘follia’ of Giovanni’s aria) danced by Giovanni and Zerlina, and the ‘teitsch’ (Allemande) with a bar of 3/8 to the prevailing beat, which Leporello forces Masetto to dance. Giovanni drags Zerlina out. She screams; Masetto rushes after them; and as the violently interrupted tonalities return via F to the tonic C, Giovanni complacently blames Leporello and offers to kill him on the spot. Zerlina and the trio, unmasking, denounce him and he is momentarily nonplussed, but in a whirlwind ensemble he outfaces them all.

***ACT 2*A street**

Giovanni scorns Leporello’s furious attempts to resign (duet, ‘Eh via buffone’). A purse changes hands, but when Leporello tells his master to give up women he claims to need them ‘as much as the food I eat and the air I breathe’. His love is universal; faithfulness to one women betrays all the rest. Leporello is forced to change clothes for the seduction of Elvira’s maid. It is twilight; Elvira, on a balcony, tries to repress her desire for Giovanni but her fluttering heart betrays her (trio, ‘Ah taci, ingiusto core’). Giovanni adopts her melody, but in the more intense dominant (sonata form perfectly matches Mozart’s dramatic requirements). In the middle section his ardour is extreme; exploring a remote key (C within the dominant region of A), he anticipates the melody of his serenade. She denounces him; he presses her; she weakens; though he pities her, Leporello is in danger of laughing aloud. She comes down to the disguised servant, who begins to enjoy the act. Giovanni chases them away and serenades the maid (canzonetta, ‘Deh vieni alla finestra’). But Masetto and a group of peasants, bearing crude weapons, are after Giovanni’s blood. The false Leporello sympathizes and in an action aria (‘Metà di voi quà vadano’) gives instructions on how to search the streets and recognize the villain. He keeps Masetto with him and gives him a beating. Hearing groans, Zerlina offers the balm only she can provide; a heart-easing melody in a gentle 3/8 invites Masetto to lay his hand on her bosom (aria, ‘Vedrai, carino’).

***A courtyard at Anna’s house***

Leporello, seeing lights, retreats with Elvira into the dark yard, intent on desertion. She begs him not to leave her; he gropes for the exit (sextet, ‘Sola in buio loco’; in E♭). A moment of magic – soft trumpets and drums mark a key-change from the dominant (B♭) to D – brings Anna and Ottavio with servants and lights. His renewed plea for marriage, and her prevarication, unfold in long melodic spans which draw the tonality to C minor. Elvira’s search for ‘Giovanni’, and Leporello’s for the gate, are interrupted by Zerlina and Masetto. All denounce the betrayer, in a scene of unreality (for the true villain is absent) made pathetic by Elvira’s plea for mercy, and comic by Leporello’s terror and abject submission when he identifies himself. This movement resembles a short finale, for it ends with a huge ensemble of consternation. Then everybody turns on Leporello, who babbles excuses as he escapes (aria, ‘Ah pietà, Signori miei’). Ottavio decides to go to the authorities; he asks the others to watch over Anna while he avenges her (aria, ‘Il mio tesoro’, a full-length virtuoso piece accompanied by muted strings and clarinets).

(In the Vienna version, Leporello escapes in a recitative, using only a motif from the Prague aria; Ottavio decides to go to the authorities. Then Zerlina drags Leporello back and ties him up, threatening dire punishments (duet, ‘Per queste tue manine’); Leporello again escapes. Masetto claims to have prevented another of Giovanni’s crimes. Elvira vents her mixed feelings: obbligato recitative, ‘In quali eccessi’ and aria, ‘Mi tradì’, a piece of vertiginous emotion embodied in perpetual-motion quavers.)

**A graveyard [night]**

Giovanni escapes an adventure by leaping the wall. Leporello joins him complaining that once again he has nearly been killed. Giovanni heartlessly narrates the conquest of Leporello’s girl; his laughter is rebuked by the dead Commendatore (an oracular utterance, with trombones). They find the statue and Leporello is forced to read the inscription: ‘I await vengeance on the villain who slew me’. Giovanni forces Leporello to invite the statue to supper. This most sinister situation is handled as a *buffo* duet (‘O statua gentilissima’) mainly reflecting the fear of Leporello as he approaches and retreats. The statue nods, then sings its acceptance; even Giovanni is puzzled and subdued, but he leads Leporello off to prepare the meal.

***A darkened room in Anna’s house***

Ottavio is again pressing his suit; he calls Anna cruel. She protests at the word (obbligato recitative, ‘Crudele! Ah nò, mio bene’); society would frown on an immediate wedding. The recitative anticipates the Larghetto of the aria (‘Non mi dir’), an undulating melody of great sweetness forming the slow section of a rondò. In the Allegro she hopes that heaven will take pity on her; the blossoming coloratura corresponds to the strength of her resolve. Ottavio is determined to share her martyrdom.

***A dining-room in Giovanni’s house (finale)***

Giovanni enjoys a meal without waiting for his guest; Leporello is frankly envious. A sequence of popular tunes (from Martín y Soler’s *Una cosa rara*, Sarti’s *Fra i due litiganti* and Mozart’s *Figaro*) played by onstage wind band accompanies the farce of Leporello stealing food and being caught with his mouth full. Elvira bursts in, barely coherent; she is making a last appeal to Giovanni to reform. He laughs at her, tries to make her join him, and to a newly minted melody drinks a toast to wine and women, ‘Sostegno e gloria d’umanità’. From outside, Elvira screams. Leporello investigates and returns in terror, babbling of a white stone man with huge strides. When knocking is heard he hides under the table and Giovanni opens the door. The overture music is reinforced by trombones as the statue enters to a crushing diminished 7th. His solemn grandeur, Giovanni’s polite, then impatient responses, and Leporello’s terrified asides, are musically characterized but subsumed to a harmonic development of unparalleled richness. The statue cannot take mortal food but he invites Giovanni to sup with him. With admirable fearlessness in a phrase of marked dignity, Giovanni accepts; but on grasping the statue’s chilling hand he is overcome by his impending dissolution. Still refusing to repent, he is engulfed in flames. The chorus of demons exactly reflects the cadences of the vengeance duet, at the beginning of Act 1. The others rush on with the police, to find only Leporello, who stammers out enough for them to understand. In an extended Larghetto, Ottavio again pleads with Anna; she tells him to wait a year for their wedding. Elvira will go to a convent, Zerlina and Masetto will marry, Leporello will find another master. All join to point the moral in a bright fugato: ‘This is the end of the evil-doer: his death is as bad as his life’.

There are two authentic versions of *Don Giovanni*, the differences mainly in the distribution of arias. Each has only one for Ottavio, since when including a new aria for Elvira (Cavalieri) in Act 2, Mozart omitted ‘Il mio tesoro’ as well as a short aria for Leporello. The concentration of arias in Act 2 which results from the common practice of including in succession those for Leporello, Ottavio and Elvira was never the authors’ intention. The additional duet for Zerlina and Leporello, its coarseness perhaps designed to humour the Viennese, is generally omitted, but Elvira’s ‘In quali eccessi … Mi tradì’ is too good to lose; some 19th-century performances, including one that may have had Da Ponte’s approval, removed it to Act 1.

In musical form and dramatic technique, particularly the proportion and design of arias and ensembles, *Don Giovanni* is largely modelled on *Figaro*. Exceptions include the ‘Catalogue’ aria, with its fast–slow tempo pattern; the first finale which besides the unique dance sequence covers a change of location; and the extended introduction, embedded in a vast structure extending from the overture to the end of the duet ‘Fuggi, crudele’. The hammonic language associated with Don Giovanni’s fall, including that duet and the second finale, marks a decisive departure from *buffo* norms (certainly not anticipated by Gazzaniga, whose setting may have influenced Anna’s first entry). The designation ‘dramma giocoso’ used by Da Ponte (though not by Mozart) has no particular significance; the serious characters are as much embroiled in the intrigue as in *Figaro*.

The tragic elements nevertheless form a new synthesis of *buffo* and serious styles, and explain why *Don Giovanni* has gripped the imagination of writers and philosophers. In particular they have been attracted by the daemonic in Giovanni, and by the impossibility of penetrating a character so mercurial, whose music says so little about his motivation; even ‘Fin ch’han dal vino’ is a set of instructions to Leporello, though also an explosion from his joyous daemon. Whereas the other characters are remarkably three-dimensional, Giovanni adapts the style of each of his victims, including the Commendatore who brings out the heroic in him and Leporello whom he chaffs in pure *buffo* style. He woos Anna by courtly flattery, Zerlina by condescension, Elvira’s maid by disguise; Elvira herself he evades or mocks, but he can also woo her with false ardour (in the trio at the beginning of Act 2).

Elvira, ignored in the 19th century, now seems the most interesting because psychologically the most complex of the women. Though the greatest singers, such as Patti, sometimes sang Zerlina, Anna attracted most interest; E. T. A. Hoffmann suggested that she had been seduced by Giovanni and was in love with him rather than Ottavio, a fantasy which received comic treatment in Shaw’s *Man and Superman*. Stendhal and Kierkegaard used Giovanni to illustrate aspects of love and the erotic. Significantly Kierkegaard was aware of earlier dramatic treatments but derived his views from the music, not the libretto or the historical evolution of the character (B. Williams, in Rushton 1981).

*Don Giovanni* is governed by a single idea, Giovanni’s flouting of society in pursuit of sexual pleasure, which binds together a disparate set of ambivalent or comic incidents. The libretto has been unfairly criticized; its episodic nature is a condition of the subject, in which respect it differs from *Figaro* and *Così*. Divine retribution appears like an act of God, or a different kind of life-force personified in the statue; what in previous treatments had been comic, perfunctory or merely gruesome, is raised to sublimity by Mozart’s music.