

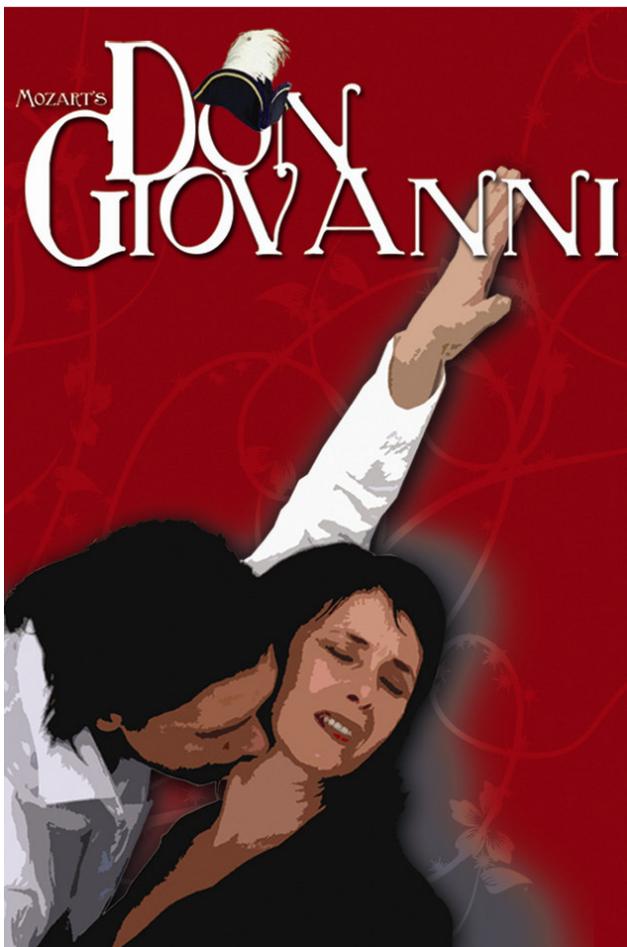
DAYTON  

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Opera

***DON GIOVANNI***  
**ULTIMATE STUDY GUIDE**

Written by Luke Dennis



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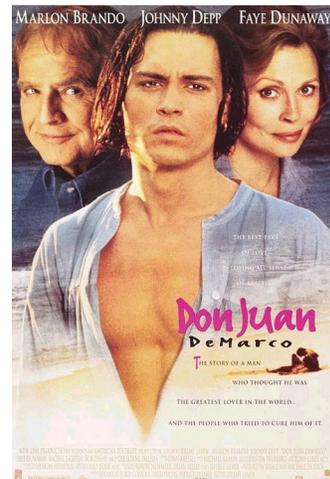
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**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** composed his first operatic arias while a mere child and went on to demonstrate complete mastery of three separate operatic genres: *opera buffa*, *opera seria*, and *Singspiel*. Where does one begin when exploring his *Don Giovanni*, the *opera buffa* acknowledged by many to be the most perfect opera ever written? Its story is complex and rooted in popular mythology; its composer and librettist have taken on mythological status; its music and libretto are an unparalleled blending of the sublime, the ridiculous, and the terrifying; and its performance history is rich and varied, having never left the international repertoire.

Let's begin with the legend of Don Juan, that "immortal immoralist." His story has provided inspiration for authors as wide-ranging as Lord Byron, Kierkegaard, and George Bernard Shaw. The image still has a hold on the popular imagination: we continue to use the term "Don Juan" to describe a womanizer. But is he a charming ladies' man or a vile, heartless seducer? It depends on whom you ask. The legend, in rough outline: Don Juan is a Spanish nobleman who has seduced and discarded over 1,500 women (give or take several hundred – in the opera, Leporello's catalog records 2,065 separate conquests). He either raped or seduced Donna Anna, a noblewoman, and then killed her father in a duel over her honor. He later encountered a statue of the dead man in a cemetery and invited him to dinner. The statue accepted and appeared at dinner demanding that Don Juan repent. When he refused, the statue dragged him down to hell.

So: is he a swashbuckling sensualist, a lover of all women who sees the innate beauty of each one? Does he truly love each woman during the time he is with her? This is the Don Juan we meet in the 1995 Johnny Depp film *Don Juan de Marco*, who murmurs, "Women sense that I search out the beauty that dwells within them..." Or: is he a sociopath who treats women as objects, as playthings that will temporarily satisfy his bottomless sexual appetite? A rapist and murderer without a conscience? This is the Don of Joseph Losey's famous film adaptation of the opera. As played by Ruggero Raimondi, the Don has a chilling emptiness behind the eyes as he coldly and calculatingly plots each seduction.



Whatever choice the director and actor make, between swashbuckling sensualist or sociopathic sex addict, or something in between, what is most compelling about the Don is his complete and utter disregard for the rules of society. Stephen Wadsworth, who directed a production of French playwright Molière's take on the legend, *Don Juan, or the Statue at the Feast*, at Seattle Repertory Theatre in 2002, observed: "People keep retelling his story at key moments in history, when Don Juan's anarchic personality is a

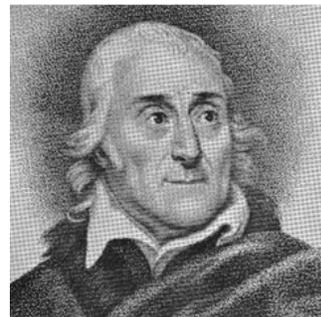
powerful way of protesting things about the social contract. He'll always be a thorn in the side of the social order, just by dint of his sexual misconduct." He is much more than a sex addict, the kind of pathetic figure you might meet on an afternoon talk show. His myth is more resonant: this is a man who thumbs his nose at convention, who pursues pleasure at the expense of breaking every rule of polite society, and expresses no remorse, even at the moment when he realizes hell is real and he's about to pay for his transgressions. It is an illustration of how far a man will go before he gets caught. And when he does not repent at the end it almost inspires admiration, or at least a sense of awe: in the face of what must be paralyzing fear (consider it, the floor opening up beneath you to reveal hot, steamy hell below and a stone statue gripping your hand to drag you there) he maintains his dignity and absolutely refuses to admit that he did anything reproachable. This is a man who stands by his principles, as unlikable as they may be.

The conductor must make a choice as well, not between romantic hero and rapist but between darkness and light: is this a comedy or a tragedy? The music has both, so which to emphasize? And we the audience must make a choice. The scenes with Leporello are hilarious, and poor Donna Elvira's wild emotionalism can inspire laughter. But by the end a man is dragged to hell. How seriously should we take this? The legend of Don Juan first appeared in print in the 1620s in the work of the Spanish monk and Golden Age playwright Tirso de Molino, *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*. In many ways this version and others like it were meant to be morality tales, to warn young Lotharios about the wages of sin; but the Don is such a magnetic character that that is not the message most of us take away.

## COMPOSITION AND PREMIERE

The composition of *Don Giovanni* came on the heels of the success of *Le nozze di Figaro* of 1786. *Figaro* marked the first time Mozart was to work with librettist Lorenzo da Ponte. *Figaro* redefined what *opera buffa* could be: it expanded on the stock characters and stock comedic situations of *buffa* and presented instead vivid, three-dimensional characters whose music and lyrics completely define them, keep the action of the complicated plot moving, and provide a framework for a serious examination of society and sexuality. Miraculously, Mozart and da Ponte managed to do the same thing two more times, with *Don Giovanni* in 1787 and *Così fan tutte* in 1790.

Da Ponte was a failed priest from Venice who was born Jewish. At seminary he excelled in the classics (he claimed to have memorized almost the entire *Inferno*, a work that was to have a great influence on his libretto for *Don Giovanni*). Da Ponte was ordained but apparently never worked as a priest; rather, he obtained a teaching position. However, affairs with several married women led to his firing and eventual exile from Venice. Thus began a peripatetic existence as he went from one odd writing job to



Lorenzo da Ponte

the next. He found himself in Vienna at the right time, when Italian opera was the rage, and began his collaboration with Mozart. He eventually made it to America, opened a grocery store, became the first professor of Italian at Columbia University, and helped introduce Italian opera to American audiences. Suffice to say, he was a colorful figure with an interesting life.

For our purposes, though, he was co-creator of *Don Giovanni*. Da Ponte and Mozart worked very well together. This is one of the great collaborations of opera/musical theatre, and set the bar very high for those that teams that followed, including Verdi and Boito, Gilbert and Sullivan, and Rodgers and Hammerstein. During the composition of *Don Giovanni* they lived across the street from each other and would yell back and forth as they wrote and composed. If you are in Prague you can see these two houses, bearing plaques commemorating the men. *Don Giovanni* premiered in Prague on October 27, 1787.



The oldest known advertisement for *Don Giovanni*, dated 1788.

## THE CHARACTERS AS REVEALED THROUGH THEIR MUSIC

Mozart brilliantly and efficiently defines each character through music, with the help of da Ponte's incisive libretto. What follows is a listening guide of sorts: an attempt to identify one or two arias that encapsulate each character. Be aware, however, that in a work as rich as this each character is given many moments to establish themselves as complex, three-dimensional figures.

First, however, read through the synopsis:

## SYNOPSIS OF THE OPERA

**ACT I.** Spain, 1600s. At night, outside the Commendatore's palace, Leporello grumbles about his duties as servant to Don Giovanni, a dissolute nobleman. Soon the masked Don appears, pursued by Donna Anna, the Commendatore's daughter, whom he has tried to seduce. When the Commendatore himself answers Anna's cries, he is killed in a duel by Giovanni, who escapes. Anna now returns with her fiancé, Don Ottavio. Finding her father dead, she makes Ottavio swear vengeance on the assassin.

At dawn, Giovanni flirts with a high-strung traveler outside a tavern. She turns out to be Donna Elvira, a woman he once seduced in Burgos, who is on his trail. Giovanni escapes while Leporello distracts Elvira by reciting his master's long catalog of conquests. Peasants arrive, celebrating the nuptials of their friends Zerlina and Masetto; when Giovanni joins in, he pursues the bride, angering the groom, who is removed by Leporello. Alone with Zerlina, the Don applies his charm, but Elvira interrupts and protectively whisks the girl away. When Elvira returns to denounce him as a seducer, Giovanni is stymied further while greeting Anna, now in mourning, and Ottavio. Declaring Elvira mad, he leads her off. Anna, having recognized his voice, realizes Giovanni was her attacker.



Suzanne Balaes as Donna Elvira in Dayton Opera's 2000 production.

Dressing for the wedding feast he has planned for the peasants, Giovanni exuberantly downs champagne.

Outside the palace, Zerlina begs Masetto to forgive her apparent infidelity. Masetto hides when the Don appears, emerging from the shadows as Giovanni corners Zerlina. The three enter the palace together. Elvira, Anna and Ottavio arrive in dominoes and masks and are invited to the feast by Leporello.

During the festivities, Leporello entices Masetto into the dance as Giovanni draws Zerlina out of the room. When the girl's cries for help put him on the spot, Giovanni tries to blame Leporello. But no one is convinced; Elvira, Anna and Ottavio unmask and confront Giovanni, who barely escapes Ottavio's drawn sword.

**ACT II.** Under Elvira's balcony, Leporello exchanges cloaks with Giovanni to woo the lady in his master's stead. Leporello leads Elvira off, leaving the Don free to serenade Elvira's maid. When Masetto passes with a band of armed peasants bent on punishing Giovanni, the disguised rake gives them false directions, then beats up Masetto. Zerlina arrives and tenderly consoles her betrothed.

In a passageway, Elvira and Leporello are surprised by Anna, Ottavio, Zerlina and Masetto, who, mistaking servant for master, threaten Leporello. Frightened, he unmasks

and escapes. When Anna departs, Ottavio affirms his confidence in their love. Elvira, frustrated at her second betrayal by the Don, voices her rage.

Leporello catches up with his master in a cemetery, where a voice warns Giovanni of his doom. This is the statue of the Commendatore, which the Don proposes Leporello invite to dinner. When the servant reluctantly stammers an invitation, the statue accepts.

In her home, Anna, still in mourning, puts off Ottavio's offer of marriage until her father is avenged.



Leporello is serving Giovanni's dinner when Elvira rushes in, begging the Don, whom she still loves, to reform. But he waves her out contemptuously. At the door, her screams announce the Commendatore's statue. Giovanni boldly refuses warnings to repent, even in the face of death. Flames engulf his house, and the sinner is dragged to hell.

Among the castle ruins, the others plan their future and recite the moral: such is the fate of a wrongdoer.

-- *courtesy of Opera News*

*Don Giovanni* at the Royal Opera House:  
Robert Lloyd as the Commendatore and Bryn Terfel as Don Giovanni

## A LISTENING GUIDE TO SELECTED ARIAS

**Don Giovanni:** The Don's music ranges from the sweetly seductive ("Deh vieni all finestra," which is his serenade to Donna Elvira's maid, to his own mandolin accompaniment) to the ebullient ("Fin ch'han dal vino," also known as the Champagne Aria) to the cruel (his private feast at the end of Act Two, as he eats while poor Leporello drools). This makes his personality difficult to pin down; as mentioned above, he requires strong choices be made by the director and actor. His music would allow him to go in any of several directions. Or perhaps he is all these things at once.



Thomas Hampson as Don Giovanni

On the creepy side, we learn about a lot about the Don in Leporello's "Catalog Aria," wherein it is revealed he has slept with some 2,065 women and will basically sleep with anyone. He's not picky, as his conquests have included "women of every social class, every shape, and every age." But what he *prefers* are the young novices...the orchestra actually shudders at this revelation. Actually, for all its delicious frenzy, "Fin ch'han dal vino" is also a little creepy, as in it the Don reveals his plans to get all the peasant girls drunk and add ten names to his List before dawn.

Voice type: Dramatic or Lyric Baritone

**Leporello:** "Madamina, il catalogo è questo" – in this, the "Catalog Aria," Leporello establishes himself as the long-suffering comic servant. In the aria he shows Donna Elvira his catalog of the Don's conquests: all 2,065 of them. This aria requires high-speed patter singing and excellent comic timing. Elsewhere in the opera Leporello offers many comic asides to audience. His music also embodies true terror in the penultimate scene when the statue of the Commendatore pays a visit: he is barely able to sing and stutters along, hiding under the table he is so filled with fear.

Voice type: Buffo Bass – a lyrical bass voice that has a wide range and agility for coloratura or comical writing

**Masetto:** "Ho capito, signor, sì" – This short, powerful aria comes following Masetto's humiliating experience with the Don and Zerlina, as he watched the Don sweep in on his wedding day and push him out of the picture so he could seduce his beautiful fiancé. He feels powerless. And worst of all, Zerlina is complicit in the seduction: she has told him to go on without her. In the aria he sings, with biting sarcasm (one of his defining qualities), "I understand, yes, sir, I do! I'll bow my head and go away; since this is the way you want it, I'll make no further objections." Before he is dragged off by Leporello, he gets a barb in at Zerlina, singing, "You little brat, how dare you flirt!" He spends the rest of the opera deeply suspicious, even as Zerlina sings some of the most seductive music ever written to assuage his fears.

Voice type: Lyric Baritone

**Don Ottavio:** The aria “Dalla sua pace” shows Don Ottavio at his tender and heroic best. Virtuosity plays a part in his characterization: his virtuosic displays help to demonstrate his heroic nature (listen also to his aria “Il mio tesoro”). The first lines of “Dalla sua pace” sum up his *modus operandi*: “All the happiness I feel comes from my darling girl; when she herself is joyous, my life is rich and full. But when her heart is aching, I think that I might die.” He is also irritated that she wants to postpone their wedding due to the murder of her father, which is not a very heroic or tender pose to strike...But it’s a human pose, and that’s what Mozart and da Ponte are presenting: human beings, not the cardboard cutouts of *opera seria* (for Don Ottavio and Donna Anna are character types straight out of *opera seria* but are given real flesh and pulsing blood by their creators).

Voice type: Tenor *leggiero*, the male equivalent of a lyric *coloratura* female voice

**Commendatore:** We meet the Commendatore in Act One, just before he is murdered by the Don. We hear that his voice is powerful as he challenges the Don to a duel. Yet he is quickly silenced: after he is stabbed you hear his life ebbing away in the music of the trio that follows. When we meet him again, as the voice of his spirit, embodied in the stone statue from the cemetery, it is terrifying. It is a voice of stone, with the crushing weight of divine retribution and eternal damnation— read more about this scene in the next section.

Voice type: Dramatic Bass, of course! In opera, basses are usually the voices of fathers, gods, priests, and devils. In this case the Commendatore is both a father and a supernatural spirit. His voice must be simply booming when he pays the Don a visit during the penultimate scene.

**Donna Anna:** Donna Anna spends much of the opera in a state of shock or righteous indignation, often at the same time. She maintains her dignity throughout. Her devotion to her slain father is moving. Listen to the recitative *accompagnato* with Don Ottavio and her aria that follows, “Or sai chi l’onore.” Mozart has created thrilling accompaniment here, with crushing brass and slashing string figures, as she comes to the sudden realization that it was the Don who attempted to rape her and murdered her father.

Voice type: Dramatic *coloratura* soprano. Donna Anna requires both a large sound that can cross loud orchestral figures (the “dramatic”) as well as the agility to handle blazing runs of *fioritura*, or twisting, high speed vocal ornaments (the “*coloratura*”).



Leontyne Price as Donna Anna in one of her many performances in that role at the Met

**Donna Elvira:** Donna Elvira has been spurned by the Don more than a few times. She is *wild* with anger at him, and yet she can't get over the fact that she still has feelings for him. She is so angry, both at him and at herself, that she spends most of the opera not in control of her emotions. That lack of control is her overriding personality trait. The aria "Mi tradì quell'alma ingrata" occurs late in Act Two, as she sings: "That ungrateful wretch betrayed me, and made me so miserable, oh Lord! He deceived me and abandoned me, yet I can't help but forgive him." It perfectly embodies her frantic ambivalence.

Voice type: Spinto Soprano – a basically lyric voice that can, when necessary, be "pushed" to cut across an orchestral or choral climax.

**Zerlina:** Zerlina's two arias sung to Masetto, "Batti, batti" and "Vedrai, carino," show Mozart at his most lyrical and enchanting. Both arias have become staples of the soubrette's repertoire. Both are funny, affectionate, and sensual – all at the same time – as she sings in "Batti, batti" of making up and spending their days and nights together in contentment and in "Vedrai, carino," of the special balm that only she can administer, if he'll only rest his hand on her breast – "Toccami qua!" she sings over and over: touch me *here*.

Voice type: Soubrette, a bright, mid-range soprano voice with a light, sweet timbre.

## OTHER MUSICAL HIGHLIGHTS

There are many other musical highlights (this is an opera where every moment is truly a "highlight"). A cursory listing might include:

- Overture – allegedly written the night before the opening, the overture captures both the comic and the tragic qualities of the opera, all wrapped up into one five minute piece of music: a mini opera unto itself.
- "La ci darem la mano" – This duet between the Don and Zerlina is a musical illustration of *how* he has seduced 2,065 women. Yes, he usually promises them marriage, which, because of his fortune, would be attractive. But the real power of his seduction is through his music. His opening melodic line urges, with sweetness and force, that Zerlina give in. He is pleading for it. He sings a solo line and then Zerlina responds an octave above. She echoes his melodic line, but uses it to express her confusion at her emotions: "Vorrei, e non vorrei": I want it, and I don't want it." Finally, when they sing together, she has both musically and physically acquiesced to his musical advances.
- The Act One Finale is devilishly difficult to sing, conduct, or play, as it features three dance meters superimposed on each other: the Minuet, danced by Anna and Ottavio, is in three; a Contredanse in 2/4 that is danced by the Don and Zerlina; and a "Teitsch" in 3/8, which Leporello forces Masetto to dance.

And finally, what is, in this writer's opinion, the Highest Highlight: the penultimate scene, in which the Don is dragged to Hell, or:

## GOING TO HELL IS HELL: THE MOST TERRIFYING SCENE IN OPERA

Hell has often been presented on the stage. The medieval theatre was rife with “hell mouths”: colorful, flame-filled openings teeming with demons that had firecrackers exploding out of their rears. However, the hell of *Don Giovanni* is a special kind of hell, a hell without parallel because of the terror of its music. Writing about it cannot begin to summon its grandeur; I include it here only to direct you to it for listening purposes. It begins, really, in the previous scene in the cemetery when the Don impiously invites the statue of the Commendatore to dinner. (He actually forces the terrified Leporello to do it.)



But the real terror begins with the entrance of the Commendatore with an earth-shattering diminished seventh chord in the brass followed by the lines “Don Giovanni! A cenar teco m’invitasti, e son venuto” – Don Giovanni, you invited me to supper, and I’ve come as your guest. The Don is at first polite, as their measured exchange is punctuated by Leporello’s frantic asides, but the Commendatore is persistent, telling him to repent. The repeated command “Pentiti!,” Repent!, is ignored by the Don, with repeated “No!”s” With each exchange the level of tension rises. The Don, who refuses to repent and claims he has no fear, offers his hand to the Commendatore, at which point the floor opens up and the Don is engulfed by the licking flames of hell, which have been musically rising up throughout the scene. Da Ponte’s stage directions actually read “He is swallowed up by the earth.” This scene is vividly brought to life in the film *Amadeus* using a carefully researched recreation of the staging conventions of Mozart’s day.

### OMISSION OF THE FINAL ENSEMBLE

This harrowing scene is followed by a ridiculous major key ensemble during which all the characters appear and sing “Such is the end of all wrongdoers! The death of those who betray us is worthy of the life they lead.”

Hmmm.

When *Don Giovanni* was presented in Vienna shortly after its premiere in Prague this ending was cut. In fact, it was generally omitted until the mid-twentieth century. Without this jaunty ending it would seem to be a tragedy. With it, it has a “happy ending” in which wrong is punished, which would make it a comedy. So is it a tragedy or a comedy? YOU get to decide!

## IN CONCLUSION...

Whether you think *Don Giovanni* is the greatest opera ever written or not, it is certainly one of the greatest. It offers something for everyone. With modern life oversexed enough as it is, the Don still intrigues us not because of his creepy, Hugh Hefner-esque qualities but because of his valiant refusal to feel bad for pursuing pleasure at all costs. He lived his life without compromise until the very end. Of course, the end finds him in hell...But was it maybe worth it? (And remember, in this post-Freud landscape we could pretend that the statue coming to life and the floor opening up were just figments of his tortured, guilt-ridden subconscious, so maybe he really felt bad after all and maybe he didn't actually go to hell.) Whatever you decide: enjoy the ride!

## GREAT RECORDINGS

There are many great recordings of this opera. Two that you can't go wrong purchasing are:

- A 1959 recording that was re-released on CD in 2002 on EMI Great Recordings of the Century features three wonderful sopranos: Graziella Sciutti, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, and Joan Sutherland; it is briskly and lovingly conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini.
- A 1997 recording on London/Decca conducted by the venerable Georg Solti features two current opera superstars, Renee Fleming as Donna Anna and the great Welsh bass/baritone Bryn Terfel. Terfel will make your hair stand on end when he goes to hell.