

Don Giovanni 'Stays the Course'

by Harley Schlanger

A review of the Houston Grand Opera's presentation of Mozart's Don Giovanni, Oct. 28 to Nov. 11, 2006.

The final scene of Mozart's opera *Il Dissoluto Punito* ("The Rake Punished"), also known as *Don Giovanni*, is one of restrained joy. Don Giovanni, the marauding libertine, having refused one last opportunity to repent, has been dragged straight to Hell, while the characters who suffered at his hand gather to sing of their triumph:

"Thus are all evil-doers punished. And in this life, scoundrels always receive their just deserts."

At the end of the glorious performance of this work by the Houston Grand Opera (HGO), as this refrain is sung, the house lights go on, and the characters on stage playfully point their fingers at members of the audience. For this time and place, this action seems to be not just appropriate—after all, this is the Houston of Enron, in the Texas of George W. Bush—but perhaps even prescient, given the smashing verdict which was delivered by voters to the neo-conservatives in the mid-term elections on Nov. 7!

While this concluding gesture brought a smile to many in the audience, I suspect that they were also profoundly shaken, as Mozart undoubtedly intended. For the evil-doer, Don Giovanni, was not punished by an act of men, but of Heaven, by Natural Law acting supernaturally, through a stone statue which imposed the final sentence. Don Giovanni's boast, that "No human force can stay me," thus appears to have been true.

Art and Politics

There has been an ongoing debate as to whether Mozart included the final scene to provide relief from the overpowering musical tension in the preceding one, in which the unrepentant Don Giovanni meets his doom. Some critics believe it weakens the ending, by inserting a didactic moral lesson. Others have written that Mozart feared condemnation for the "licentiousness" of the opera, so he inserted a religiously correct footnote to protect him, and his collaborators, from the wrath of the Catholic Church, or an unhinged nobleman.

Such arguments show that their proponents have missed the point. Mozart's opera is highly political, in the only way that great art can be political. This subject, of the relationship between art and politics, was taken up by Lyndon LaRouche,

in a review of the next-to-the-last opera written by Mozart, *La Clemenza di Tito* ("The Clemency of Titus"), which he saw in Dresden several years ago.

"The only kind of politics which belongs within the domain of such art," he wrote, "is the politics of ideas bearing upon the task of defining the nature of mankind, as all of the great Classical Greek and modern tragedies do" (LaRouche, "A Surprise in Dresden," *EIR*, Dec. 8, 2000).

In *La Clemenza*, Titus ultimately rejected vengeance, which is embedded within the axioms of Roman law, in favor of forgiveness, such that his decision cohered "with the higher principle of agapē," which, through the opera, "is reproduced within the imagination of the individual member of the audience."

LaRouche continued, that in his presentation of this transformation, "Mozart does not preach, he evokes the experience of the discovery of the principle of agapē within the cognitive experience of the individual members of the audience, by means of the unfolding, ironical development within the drama as a whole."

By such means, Mozart accomplished what his contemporary, Friedrich Schiller, described as the goal of great drama: To make members of the audience leave the theater as better human beings than when they entered!

Mozart Takes on the Venetians

In Mozart's mature operas, beginning with his first collaboration with the poet/librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte, *The Marriage of Figaro* (first performed in Vienna in May 1786, more than a year before *Don Giovanni* premiered), the composer addressed the great question of his time: Would the success of the American Revolution, in overthrowing the rule of an oligarchic empire, spread to Europe? Would the idea of the inalienable rights of man, protected by institutions of self-government, replace that of the divine right of monarchs and the tyrannical, arbitrary power of the landed aristocracy, as the basis for government?

European republicans faced two primary obstacles. First was the seeming complacency of the general populace, their willingness to abide by oligarchic traditions, in which the majority was treated like human cattle. They might complain about such treatment, as did Don Giovanni's servant Leporello, or the peasant Masetto, who was beaten by Don Giovanni for attempting to interfere with his plans to seduce Zerlina, Masetto's betrothed.

However, at the end, as they celebrate the Don's demise, they reveal that they will continue to abide by the laws of oligarchic rule. Masetto and Zerlina sing that they wish only to go home to dinner, while the abused Leporello announces that he is off to the tavern, to find another master to serve—albeit, this time, a better one.

The real focus of Mozart and Da Ponte, was to expose what was behind the littleness of the people, which caused them to cower in fear when confronted by tyranny. As Susan



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Leporello, *Don Giovanni's* obsequious servant, confronts an outraged Donna Elvira with evidence of his master's infidelity.

Bowen demonstrates in the accompanying article, these two artists understood that the problem was not just the continued existence of a parasitical feudal oligarchy, but of a specific type of oligarchic system, spawned in Venice, which, by the end of the 18th Century, was the dominant political/cultural force in Europe.

The problem of Venice was well known among republican circles in Europe, especially in German-language culture. Two of William Shakespeare's plays which exposed the evil duplicity of the Venetians and their system—*The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello*—were well known in Germany, thanks largely to the work of the universal genius Gotthold Lessing. In 1757, Lessing launched a project to develop a German "national" theater, centered around translating the tragedies and histories of Shakespeare, to replace the dreadful, but popular, plays of the French "Enlightenment." French theater was the entertainment of choice for the Venetian-linked oligarchy, with its emphasis on style and manners, and its adherence to the empiricist philosophical outlook of Aristotle, with its insistence on the status quo.

Mozart's sometime patron, the Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II, supported the creation of a German-language "national" theater, and Mozart's first opera composed for Vienna, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, was a contribution toward this goal. Both Joseph II, a reformer with some sympathies for the American Revolution, and Mozart, were the targets of intrigues by court figures among the nobility who favored Venetian methods.

Mozart was familiar with Shakespeare's "Venice" plays from his acquaintance with Emanuel Schikaneder, whose travelling theater company spent nearly six months in Salzburg, in 1780-81. Schikaneder became a regular at the Mozart household, and gave them three complimentary tickets for the

season. His company regularly performed Shakespeare.

Schikaneder is perhaps most famous as the librettist for Mozart's last opera, *The Magic Flute*, in which he appeared in the role of the birdman Papageno.

Another devastating critique of Venice written during this time was Schiller's *The Ghost Seer*.

Mozart's Thorough Composition

From the first measures of the overture to *Don Giovanni*, with its eerie opening theme—in which the first violins play syncopated quarter notes against 16th notes played by the second violins, followed by a succession of minor scales played by the first violins and the flutes, an octave apart—the audience is riveted, seized by a sense that something both awful,



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Donna Elvira struggles to keep her husband, Don Giovanni, from seducing her maid Zerlina, who is betrothed to Masetto.



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The statue of the Commendatore (right), who had been murdered by Don Giovanni, when the old man attempted to defend his daughter, gives Don Giovanni one last chance to repent of his crimes.

and yet, sublime, is coming.

This theme is heard again at the end of the opera, in the pivotal scene when the statue of the Commendatore—who was murdered by Don Giovanni in the first scene, while defending his daughter against the rapacious intentions of the Don—accepts Don Giovanni’s offer, and comes to dinner. When this theme is repeated, it is accompanied by three voices: that of the Commendatore, warning Giovanni that he must repent; Don Giovanni refusing, defiantly; and a whimpering Leporello, begging that he submit. The repetition compresses the action of the preceding three and a half hours, forcing a recognition in the audience, that Don Giovanni will not change. He will continue to use force against those who oppose him, while trifling with women and sneering at Heaven.

Though he can be seductive, as in the charming “*La ci darem la mano*” duet with Zerlina, he is always prepared to apply brute force, as when he pulls Masetto aside and warns him, “Masetto, be discrete; or else—be sorry!” The audience has already seen him kill, and walk away laughing.

He is a model Venetian. He is a de Maistre Beast-Man.

The audience is, thus, not surprised to see him defiant to the end. Don Giovanni truly “stays the course.”

Developing a Mozart Tradition

The Houston Grand Opera’s presentation of *Don Giovanni* was a fine way to end a year of commemoration of the 250th anniversary of Mozart’s birth. The performance was superb. The conductor, Patrick Summers, demonstrated from

the opening measures that he would not rush, allowing the counterpoint to unfold and the tension to build, to heighten the ironies in the libretto.

The performance was a reprise of the staging brought to Houston in 1986 by the late Goran Jarvefelt, who won acclaim for his Mozart productions at the Swedish Royal Theatre (Drottningholm). The settings are simple, allowing the use of an uncluttered stage, to give maximum freedom of motion, so the audience has a clear view of the conspiracies and counter-conspiracies at work. The director of the present HGO performance is American director Harry Silverstein, who remains faithful to Jarvefelt’s vision.

The singing was top-notch. Don Giovanni was played by Polish baritone Mariusz Kwiecien, who thrilled the audience with his powerful performance. He re-

mained the fierce libertine to the end, playing his final scene with a drunken verve, intoxicated by both wine and the power he wielded. Soprano Alexandra Deshorties was also excellent, reaching the audience convincingly with both the mournful plaints and the pleas for vengeance of Donna Anna. The Commendatore was sung forcefully by bass Raymond Aceto, whose entrance as the stone statue at the end was chilling.

One of the most exciting aspects of HGO is its development of young artists, through the HGO Studio program. Soprano Anna María Martínez, who played the Contessa in *Figaro*, and was a magnificent Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, is an alumna of the HGO Studio, as is Oren Graddus, who played Leporello. Ryan McKinny, bass-baritone, who sang the role of Masetto, is another Studio graduate. This commitment to youth by HGO means that the wonderful performances of Mozart of the last two decades will likely become a tradition.

In concluding his review of *Clemenza*, Lyndon LaRouche wrote that such traditions are indispensable if nations “are to be inspired to rise above that kind of general moral depravity” which prevails today.

“Without sweeping and profound changes in the cultural habits acquired during the recent thirty-five years, the U.S. were not likely to outlive the effects of the global financial collapse now nearing its climax. . . . *Clemenza*, so performed [as in Dresden] is essential spiritual medicine for all mankind. . . .”

The HGO’s *Don Giovanni* dispensed such “essential spiritual medicine” in large doses in its just-concluded run.