

DON GIOVANNI
By Marilyn Mercur

Composer: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Librettist: Lorenzo Da Ponte, after the play by Tirso de Molina

Premiere: October 29, 1787 at the Nostitz (National) Theater in Prague

Location: Seville, Spain

Time: Mid-17th Century

CHARACTERS: Don Giovanni, a nobleman
Leporello, servant of Don Giovanni
Don Ottavio, betrothed to Donna Anna
Donna Anna, daughter of the Commendatore,
betrothed to Don Ottavio
Commendatore, Donna Anna's father
Donna Elvira, lady of Burgos
Masetto, a peasant
Zerlina, betrothed to Masetto

NB: Please keep in mind that any Web sites cited here (some of which may contain advertising) may be fallible, as are books, newspapers and magazines. When you do research, fact checking is imperative!

Index

1. Historical Background [link to section]
2. Music and Drama [link to section]
3. What's Love Got To Do With It? [link to section]
4. Activities and Projects [link to section]

EXPLORE AND DISCUSS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

• Don Juan

Don Juan (wŏn', hwŏn', jŭ'ən) *n.* 1. A libertine; a profligate. 2. A man who is an obsessive seducer of women.

For more information, see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_Juan

<http://archive.operainfo.org/broadcast/operaBackground.cgi?id=19&language=1>

Following the success of *The Marriage of Figaro*, Mozart's librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, suggested the subject of Don Juan Tenorio, the legendary 14th-century Spanish nobleman and libertine, for Mozart's next opera. Although there is no evidence to suggest that an actual Don Juan Tenorio ever existed, the legend has inspired countless works—an epic poem by Lord Byron, a novel, a symphonic tone poem, paintings, ballets, several plays (including one by Molière), close to 50 other operas, and a number of movies.

Question: What makes this character so fascinating? Can you name any 20th- or 21st-century men like Don Juan? Can you name any women who might be considered female counterparts to Don Juan?

• Definition, Synonyms and Much More

For Web sites with links to related topics, **answers.com** is an interesting place to visit. It not only gives a dictionary definition for the term “Don Juan,” but also entries from a thesaurus, a medical dictionary, and an encyclopedia. Additionally, it provides literary references and a comprehensive listing of other works derived from the story of Don Juan.

See: <http://www.answers.com/topic/don-juan>

Question: If you are using a computer for online research, what can you

do to make sure the information you come across is accurate and true?

- **Casanova**

In *Roget's International Thesaurus*, Lothario, Casanova, Romeo, and Don Juan are synonymous. To label someone a Casanova suggests that he is “an ardent and probably promiscuous lover.” The real Casanova lived from 1725 to 1798. He bears a startling resemblance to the legendary Don Juan.

To learn more, see:

<http://www.dickinson.edu/~emery/Casanova.htm>,

<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/casanova.htm>

Question: What words would you use to describe someone who exhibits the opposite characteristics from a Don Juan or a Casanova?

- **Pseudonyms or Nom de Plume (Pen Name)**

The first literary treatment of the Don Juan legend was a Spanish play called *El Burlador de Sevilla Y Convidado de Piedra*, written by Friar Gabriel Tellez, who lived in Spain from 1571-1641. Tellez wrote under the pseudonym, Tirso de Molina.

For more information on pseudonyms, see:

<http://www.trussel.com/books/aka.htm>,

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudonym>,

<http://www.answers.com/topic/pseudonymity>

Question: Can you name other people who used a pseudonym or nom de plume in their professional life? What reasons might there be for a person not to use his or her original name? Do you have a nickname which you prefer to your given name? Why might you want to change your name legally?

- **Mozart: High Achiever**

Between 1781 and 1787, Mozart composed, *Idomeneo*, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, the Mass in c minor, six “Haydn” String Quartets, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, and countless other piano and instrumental works. And that’s not all; to earn his livelihood, Mozart gave concerts and taught private pupils. Considered by many a genius, he did this at a time when there were no cars, airplanes, or telephones, to say nothing of computers, fax machines, or recording equipment.

For more information, see:

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/music/NYCO/dongiovanni/bio.html>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,5365258-110427,00.html>

Question: Do you think technological advances encourage or hinder creativity? How might modern-day technology have helped Mozart?

• A Fellow Has To Make a Living!

Like some of the characters in the brilliant libretti he wrote for Mozart, Lorenzo Da Ponte was every bit the libertine. As a result, he was forced to move from one town to another, from one country to another, finally ending up in New York City, where he died in 1838 at the age of 89. During his lifetime, Da Ponte supported himself as a priest, teacher, professional gambler, secretary, poet to the court of Emperor Joseph II, librettist, owner of a bookstore, proprietor of a grocery store, Italian tutor, impresario, and finally as a Professor of Italian Language and Literature at Columbia University.

For more information, see:

<http://www.operaamerica.org/audiences/learningcenter/cornerstones/dg/dglib.htm>

http://www.nybooks.com/shop/product?usca_p=t&product_id=27

http://www.pzweifel.com/music/lorenzo_da_ponte.htm

<http://www.italian.ucla.edu/lpil/daponte.html>

Question: If your life goes according to your hopes and dreams, what profession or professions would you like to undertake? If it does not go according to plan, what would you be willing to do to earn a livelihood?

• Seville

In addition to the Don Juan legend, among other things Seville is famous for are its oranges and its hot summers. In 1881, the temperature reached 50° C, or 122° F.

Question: What else is Seville noted for? What other operas can you name that take place in Seville?

• Prague

Though most of Mozart's operas had their premieres in Vienna, the city of Prague was unique among other European capitals at that time. According to historian Charles Burney, music instruction in Prague, especially instrumental music, was

Comment [EA1]: These are two different, separate thoughts. This segue could be smoother.

considered as necessary a part of elementary education as reading and writing. The level of musical fluency among the citizens of Prague may have been one of the reasons that Pasquale Bondini asked Mozart to compose an opera for the new national theater, which he managed. In contrast to Prague, the United States has had a checkered history regarding music education in its elementary and secondary schools.

Comment [EA2]: This is an unequal comparison. Prague is a capital city and the US is an entire country.

For information on Prague today, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prague>

Question: If music education was considered as important as reading and writing in this country, how do you think it would change people's lives? How has learning about music and the arts in general affected your life?

• Bohemia (Czechoslovakia)

If one looks at a map printed twenty years or thirty ago, the names of countries and their borders would, in many cases, be different from a map printed today. The same state of affairs existed during Mozart's time. The history of upheavals and invasions in Bohemia, both political and religious, can be traced back to the first century B.C. After World War I, the country was reconstituted as Czechoslovakia, and is now the Czech Republic.

For more information, see: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bohemia>
<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwartz/hist255/bohem/tdefine.html>

Question: People who live in Bohemia are called Bohemians, yet they are not the same as the bohemians of *La Bohème*. Is there a connection between the country and the bohemian movement, and if so, what is it?

• 17th- and 18th-Century Fashion

While Mozart lived toward the end of the 18th century, *Don Giovanni* is set in the middle of the 17th century. It would be an understatement to say that the attire people wore in those days bears little resemblance to what people wear now.

For more information on 17th- and 18th-century costumes, see:
<http://www.costumes.org/history/100pages/17thlinks.htm>
<http://www.costumes.org/history/100pages/18thlinks.htm>
<http://www.englishcountrydancing.org/clothing.html>

Question: What do you think you'd like or dislike about the clothes that people wore in the 17th or 18th centuries?

MUSIC and DRAMA

• Overtures

Mozart excelled not only at vocal writing, but at instrumental and orchestral writing, as well. The overtures to his operas are often played as individual concert pieces in symphony performances.

Question: What is the definition of overture? When you listen to the overture to *Don Giovanni*, what is Mozart conveying in the orchestral music? How does the overture set the mood for the opera?

• Mozart's work habits

According to history, Mozart generally began work on new projects immediately; however, there are also stories of his writing music at the very last minute, with musicians having to sight-read portions of a score at the premiere. Even today, when a new work is commissioned, it is not uncommon for a playwright or composer to make last-minute adjustments right up to opening night.

Question: How much of what you do is done under pressure, and does that pressure affect the outcome and quality in a positive or negative way?

• *Dramma giocoso*

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* is classified as "*Dramma giocoso*," or "Playful Drama."

Question: What characters and plot situations do you consider playful? Which are dramatic? How do the comic and dramatic elements balance each other? Which of the characters can you identify with and why?

• Vocal Ornamentation

Ornamentation is a kind of decorative embellishment to the melodic line. It was an integral part of the classical style, and Mozart was able to compose the way he did—and sometimes he wrote extremely difficult vocal music—because he knew his singers could sing all the notes. Hearing singers execute intricate runs or trills is exciting for the listener. As in sports, the element of difficulty and danger adds to an audience's excitement.

Question: What is your reaction when you know a singer is singing a particularly difficult aria? What kind of activities do you do that have an element of difficulty or risk?

- **Repent or Be Doomed**

In the finale of *Don Giovanni*, the Don refuses to repent for his licentious behavior, and is banished to hell, overpowered by the Commendatore's statue. This scene is one of the most dramatic and thrilling in opera. The subject of heaven and hell has captivated philosophers, writers, artists, musicians, religious thinkers—just about everyone—for centuries.

Question: Why won't Don Giovanni repent? What are other operas that deal with the notion of heaven and hell, with moral and philosophical issues? Do these operas provide answers or do they provoke more questions? What is your concept of heaven and hell?

- **Statue "comes to life"**

The role of the Commendatore is sung by a bass, and when the voice of the Commendatore's statue is heard, it is usually amplified to chilling effect.

Question: What other operas, plays, or movies can you name in which a large, resonant, or distinctive voice is essential for a particular part?

- **Use of operatic music in other contexts**

Operatic excerpts have been used in situations which are indirectly related to the arts.

Question: Have you heard music from *Don Giovanni* in movies, commercials, transcriptions, used by figure skaters, or in any other non-operatic setting?

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

- **Whut you goin' to do?**

In the musical, *Oklahoma*, the character of Laurie sings: "Whut you goin' to

do when a feller gits flirty, and starts to talk purty? Whut you goin' to do?" In *Don Giovanni*, the peasant girl, Zerlina, faces the same dilemma when the suave, sophisticated Giovanni takes a liking to her, and sensing an easy conquest, goes into action.

Question: What would you do if someone older or in a position of authority tried to persuade you to do something you don't want to do, or that you feel is wrong? How can it be handled without jeopardizing a job, a friendship, or possibly school grades?

- **Catalogue Aria**

Among the duties Leporello performs for his master is keeping count of the Don's love conquests. Leporello's Catalogue Aria, provides one of the more humorous scenes in the opera. Although *Don Giovanni* is considered a masterpiece by most aficionados, its subject matter might offend some people.

Question: The film industry uses a system which rates movies according to their suitability for children; i.e., PG, PG-13, and R. How would you rate *Don Giovanni*?

- **Forsaken and Forlorn**

All the love in the world can't ease Donna Anna's grief over her father's death. As sweet and tender as Don Ottavio is in expressing his feelings for his beloved, his entreaties cannot persuade Donna Anna to marry him.

Question: If you were Donna Anna or Don Ottavio, how would you respond? What would you do to nurture the relationship? How do you end a relationship and not hurt the other person?

- **Serenade**

In Act Two, Don Giovanni, disguised as Leporello, serenades Elvira's maid, accompanying himself on the mandolin. Serenades such as this are found in numerous operas.

Question: Can you name other operas, musicals, or plays where one character serenades another? Is serenading old-fashioned, or is it something one would do today? Have you ever wanted to express yourself in song to anyone? Did you have the courage to do so?

ACTIVITIES AND PROJECTS

• Dueling and Fencing

In the opening scene of *Don Giovanni*, the Commendatore engages the Don in a duel in order to defend the honor of his daughter. Giovanni, an expert swordsman, kills the older man.

Although duels and sword fights may be a thing of the past, the sport of fencing is growing in popularity, even though it doesn't get the attention that martial arts do today. All sports, of course, require training and practice.

For more information, see:

<http://microbiol.org/vl.martial.arts/>

<http://www.mararts.org/index.shtml>

<http://www.whatisfencing.com/>,

<http://www.usfencing.org/usfa/>

If you're interested in taking up fencing, check your local Yellow Pages to see if there are any fencing classes offered in your community. Ask if you may observe a class or attend a fencing match.

• Tracking Your Family History

The legend on which *Don Giovanni* is based is thought to have originated in Seville, and concerns the real-life exploits of Don Juan Tenorio, who allegedly lived during the 14th century in Seville. Based on genealogy records and the Federal Census, there were 24,838 matches for the name Tenorio in the United States.

Make your own family tree, going back as many generations as you can. If you get stuck, there are books and computer programs that can help, but be wary of sites that charge to do the research for you.

• Minuet and Line Dancing

At the end of the first act, Don Giovanni invites the villagers to a grand party. Inside the castle, the musicians strike up a minuet; however, Mozart cleverly adds two other dance tunes, all played simultaneously, creating momentary musical confusion.

Find a partner and sign up for a series of ballroom dancing classes. Or try jazz, hip-hop, or any other kind of dance that's popular in your area!

- **Masks**

Donna Anna, Donna Elvira and Don Ottavio wear masks to conceal their identity when they attend Giovanni's garden party.

Create your own elaborate mask and give a party where everyone comes wearing a costume and mask. Give a prize to the person no one can identify!

- **Dining à Deux**

In the last act, Don Giovanni invites the Commendatore's Statue to dine with him in his palace. The elegant table is set for a sumptuous banquet. Off to one side, a group of musicians strike up some music. It will be Giovanni's last supper!

Plan a romantic dinner for yourself and your date. Write up the menu on fine stationery. Serve a selection of Spanish tapas; they're not difficult to make, and the websites listed below will get you started. Have candles, music of your choosing, and dress up for the occasion. No uninvited stone guests, por favor.

For more information on Spanish tapas, see:

<http://www.ericweisstein.com/fun/wine/tapas.html>

<http://www.globalgourmet.com/destinations/spain/spaintapa.html>

<http://www.chefnorm.com/tapas.html>

- **Two Book Recommendations to Start a Book Club**

1) James Michener, a Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, is the author of *Iberia—Spanish Travels and Reflections*, a richly detailed account of the thirty years Michener spent in Spain. He grew up not knowing who his parents were and according to an interview cited below, he grew up in poverty. His life is inspiring, as are the books he has written.

2) Marcia Davenport wrote a memoir, entitled *Too Strong for Fantasy: A Personal Record of Music, Literature, and Politics in America and Europe over Half a Century*, which covers Davenport's life, beginning in the early 1900s in New York, and moving on to Czechoslovakia after World War II. Her association with musical and political greats brings history alive and makes this book well worth reading.

Get a group together after reading Michener's *Iberia* and Davenport's *Too Strong for Fantasy*. Make a list of questions and discussion points regarding

both Spain's and Czechoslovakia's history, languages (there are more than three languages and innumerable dialects spoken in Spain), food, culture, politics, religion; etc. Include in the group discussion how what you've learned from the book fits in with what you know about Mozart and his operas.

For more information about the authors, see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcia_Davenport

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Michener

• Inspired by the Don Juan Legend

Among the works that the Don Juan legend inspired is George Bernard Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell*, which is actually Act Three of *Man and Superman*. Though *Man and Superman* was not considered one of Shaw's better plays, if you're curious, you might try reading the third act found on the website below.

Don Juan in Hell

<http://www.bigeye.com/donjuan.htm>

For those who read Spanish, the first literary treatment of the Don Juan legend, Tirso de Molina's *El Burlador de Sevilla Y Convidado de Piedra* is available on two websites listed below.

El Burlador de Sevilla Y Convidado de Piedra

<http://www.coh.arizona.edu/spanish/comedia/tirso/bursev.html>

<http://www.trinity.edu/org/comedia/tirso/bursev.pdf>

A play written by José Zorilla in 1844, entitled *Don Juan Tenorio*, is yet another curiosity, which some may find interesting as a comparison to Mozart's opera.

Don Juan Tenorio

<http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/8djtn10.txt>

• Movies and videos

Don Giovanni with Cesare Siepi in the title role. Wilhelm Furtwängler conducts the 1955 production, directed by Herbert Graf.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0186968/fullcredits>

Don Giovanni with Ruggero Raimondi in the title role. Lorin Maazel conducts the production directed by Rolf Liebermann, and adapted by Joseph Losey for film in 1979.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0079063/fullcredits>

Don Giovanni with Samuel Ramey in the title role. Herbert von Karajan conducts the 1987 production, directed by Michael Hampe.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0239352/fullcredits>

Don Giovanni with Thomas Allen in the title role. Riccardo Muti conducts the 1989 production, directed by Giorgio Strehler.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0194437/fullcredits>

Don Giovanni with Samuel Ramey in the title role. James Levine conducts the 1990 Franco Zeffirelli production.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277678/fullcredits>

Don Giovanni with Eugene Perry in the title role. Craig Smith conducts the Peter Sellars production, made for television in 1990.

See: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0253051/fullcredits>

There are other *Don Giovanni* performances listed on the IMDB link, as well as films about Don Juan and Casanova. Probably the most famous movie is *Don Juan de Marco*, starring Johnny Depp in the title role, and featuring Marlon Brando and Faye Dunaway.

- **Websites listing Operas in Film**

<http://www.imdb.com/keyword/opera/>

(Sort from A-Z, and search for specific opera)