By Judith Malafronte

Pushing Boundaries with DON GIOVANNI

Many years ago, my solfège teacher told me about sneaking out of Paris on public transportation with the original manuscript of *Don Giovanni* wrapped in brown paper on her lap. Annette Dieudonné—composer, translator, keyboardist, and musicologist—had been a librarian at the Paris Conservatoire during World War II, and just before the German occupation, she took many priceless manuscripts out to the country and buried them to avoid confiscation or destruction. (She neglected to mention that she had been awarded the Légion d'honneur for this work.)

Another woman who saved *Don Giovanni* was Pauline Viardot, the legendary 19th-century diva, who had purchased this same manuscript from a dealer who had acquired it from Mozart's widow, Constanze. Viardot was a consummate musician and artist and had sung the roles of both Donna Anna and Zerlina over her long career. She sold her jewels to obtain the treasured manuscript, which she kept in a shrine in her home, and eventually bequeathed or sold it to the Conservatoire, whose library is now part of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Although the Don Juan legend originated long before Spanish playwright Tirso de Molina wrote *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (*The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*) around 1617, Lorenzo Da Ponte was preparing for the 1787 Prague premiere by reworking a brand new libretto by Giovanni Bertati, which had been set by Giuseppe Gazzaniga for a run in Venice just months before.

Da Ponte tempered Bertati's comic treatment by deepening the drama and bringing complexity and seriousness to all the characters. If Da Ponte knew Molière's 1665 *Dom Juan ou le Festin de pierre*, it was only in the heavily censored version published in 1682. Director Stephen Wadsworth, whose new translation of Molière's *Dom Juan* is soon to be published by Smith and Kraus, finds the title character sexy and dangerous because of his mind and his free-thinking. "Molière aimed this anarchic force at the hypocrisy of church and state; his Don Juan observed the world with a shocking, cleansing rationality." No wonder the censors ordered revisions after only one performance. It was never about sex. (Molière's Don Juan even seduces a nun.) More upsetting to the establishment was what Wadsworth calls Giovanni's "rational, logical, unapologetic world-view," skeptical and anti-religious. While Tirso's Don Juan cheekily plans to repent his dissolute life at the last minute, Molière's, like Da Ponte's, is a committed atheist to the end.

The opera's characters call him *scellerato*, wicked, *barbaro*, monster, *perfido*, *ingannato*, liar, deceiver. One calls him boss, another one husband. His second line is "Who I am, you will not know." We hear Don Giovanni's slippery identity and enigmatic nature in the music Mozart wrote for him. Giovanni uses a charming, all-purpose serenade style for both Donna Elvira and her maid, but apart from this, his music escapes definition. There

Carnival Mask II *(pencil and watercolor on paper) by Carolyn Hubbard-Ford* / Bridgeman Images

are vocal demands for every other character that limit casting choices, but Giovanni can be sung by all sorts of voices. In the same way, we see the chameleon in his many disguises. Masked, he intrudes on Anna insinuating himself as her fiancé. To gain access to Elvira's maid, he borrows Leporello's cloak, claiming that women of her class are put off by a nobleman's clothing. (Never mind that the aristocratic thing worked well on Zerlina.) Is he not capable of owning his identity, not courageous enough to reveal himself?

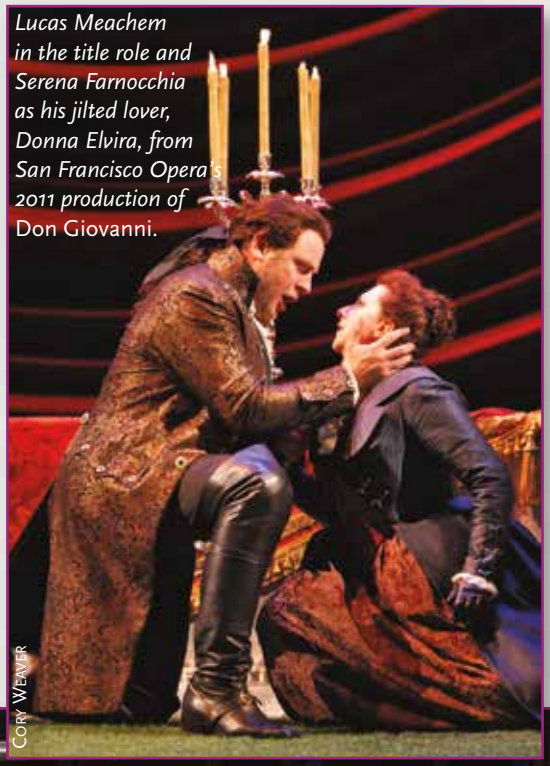
In Pier Luigi Pizzi's concept for the 2009 Sferisterio Opera Festival in Macerata, Italy, Leporello spends the overture dressing and masking Giovanni in Mephistophelean red for what seems to be a ritualistic nightly prowl. Since Peter Sellars' 1987 production, where Giovanni was a seedy drug addict, it's no longer possible to see him as a beloved rogue, a charming Ezio Pinza in doublet and tights. In Kasper Holten's intellectualized concept for Royal Opera, Covent Garden in 2014, Giovanni seems dead from the beginning, a shell of a man seeking thrills in one-night stands, whose end is the eternal damnation of a nervous breakdown.

Director Michael Grandage notes that Giovanni is "going to hell because he killed a man—he's not going to hell because he seduced a lot of women." But does he believe in the demons even as they encircle him? Reading the story as a rejection of the church rather than about sexual transgression or criminal behavior, there's a positive spin: Giovanni boldly accepts the punishment of eternal flames for his earthly activities. He refuses to convert or confess. Is his uncompromising behavior courageous and noble, or just another manifestation of his ignorance and self-absorption?

How can we play Giovanni nowadays? Leporello is forever urging his boss to change his ways, and musicologist and opera blogger Micaela Baranello notes "people don't want to see an opera with a rapist in the center, so I think most directors and baritones want to preserve at least some of that charm." Stephen Wadsworth agrees: "His actions were never politically correct, but the theory was if Cesare Siepi were singing to you in a honeyed voice, mezza voce, molto legato, under your window, wouldn't that turn you on? Now things have changed: we need to justify Giovanni's crotch grabbing in a way that an audience will root for him."

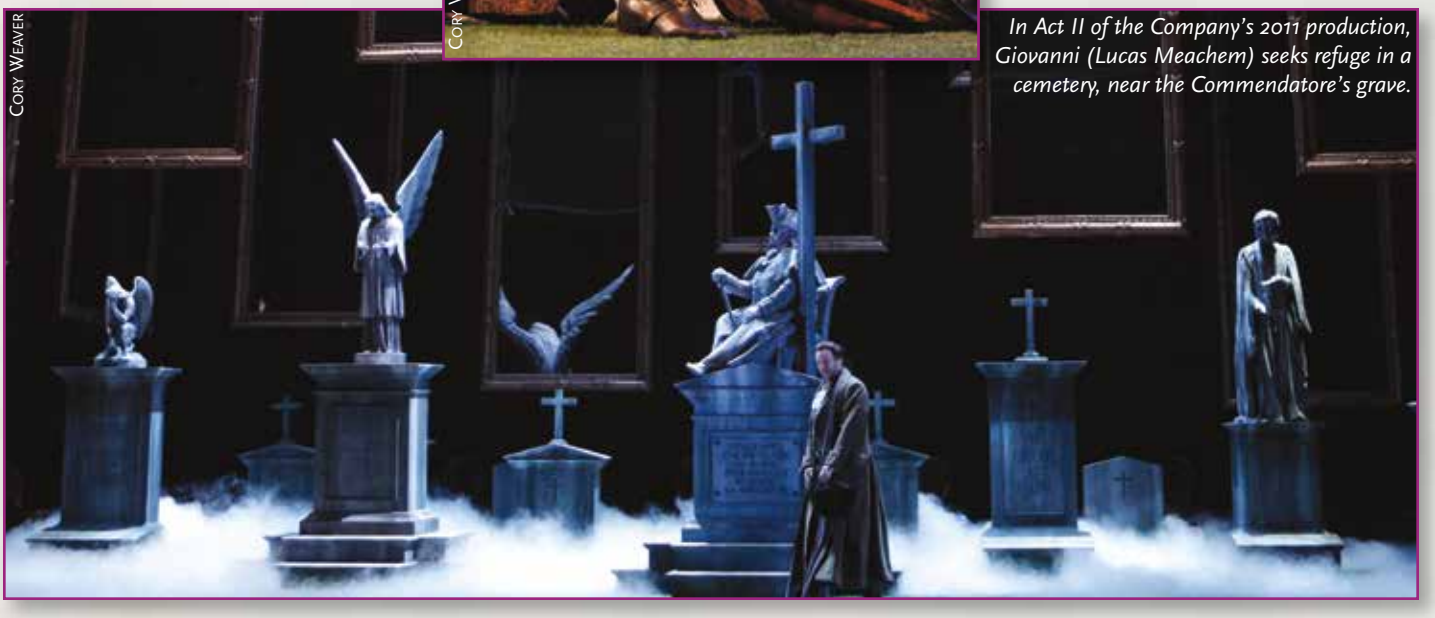
If we are not watching an opera about a criminal, what then? Are we hearing a revenge story? The through line and the biggest change Da Ponte made to Bertati's libretto is that Donna Anna doesn't retire to a convent immediately. Instead, she rallies Ottavio and the others in a furious cry for justice and punishment for the man who raped her and murdered her father. But the perp is part of the system. Don Giovanni rapes and kills because he can. The system allows it because of his wealth, power, and social standing. No earthly justice is possible, which is why a fiery descent to hell, even if comic in effect, is the only possible ending.

And what of the victims? In rape culture, euphemisms like "inappropriate behavior" and "sexual misconduct" soften the horrible realities of rape and sexual assault, while society teaches "don't get raped" rather than "don't rape." In Pizzi's production, the three



Lucas Meachem in the title role and Serena Farnocchia as his jilted lover, Donna Elvira, from San Francisco Opera's 2011 production of Don Giovanni.

Cory Weaver



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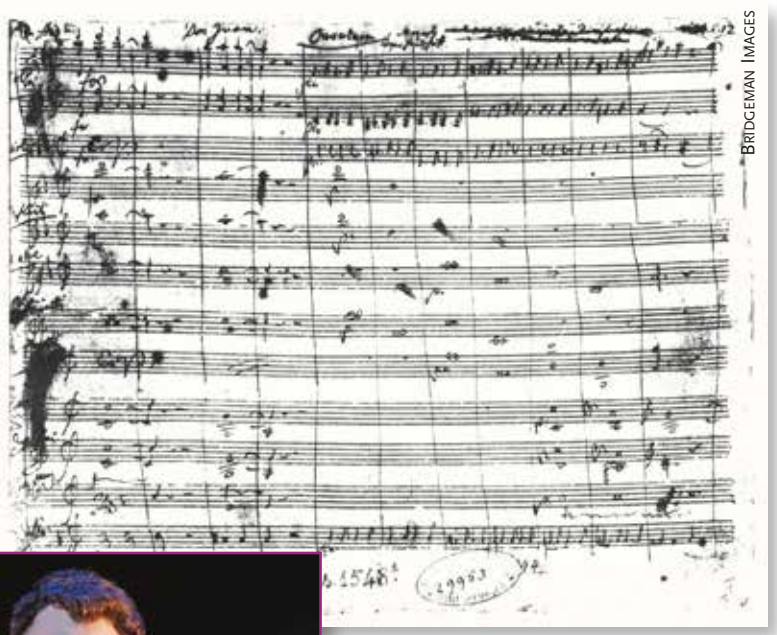
In Act II of the Company's 2011 production, Giovanni (Lucas Meachem) seeks refuge in a cemetery, near the Commendatore's grave.



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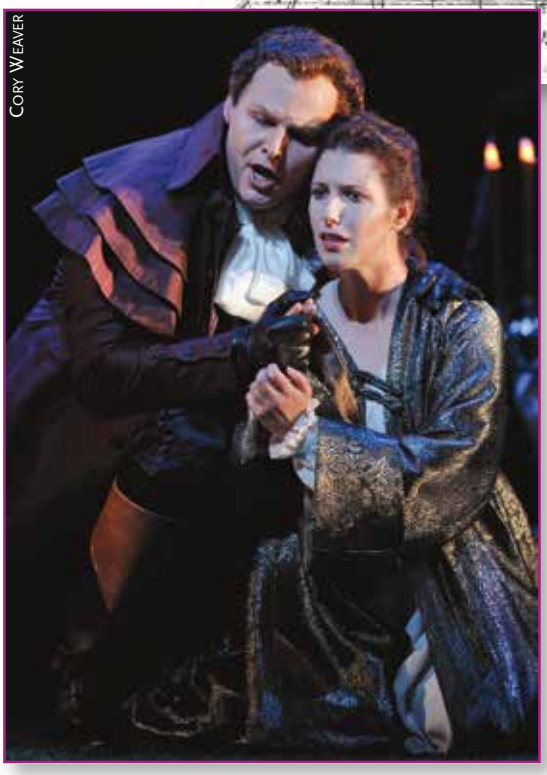
Right: The dramatic opening measure of Don Giovanni *as seen in Mozart's handwriting. The manuscript is housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.*

Below: From the Company's 2011 production, Shawn Mathey (Don Ottavio) and Ellie Dehn (Donna Anna) lament the murder of her father.

sopranos as well as the entire female chorus are coiffed and made up to look alike, which highlights their disposability and lack of identity in the eyes of Giovanni. Director Kasper Holton peoples his stage with ghostly women from Giovanni's past while video projections keep the victims' names—all 1,003 of them—constantly in view.

In her fascinating book, *Understanding the Women of Mozart's Operas*, Kristi Brown-Montesano points out that "Elvira forgives, Zerlina forgets, but Anna does neither." The concentrated fury of Anna's vocal writing—with most of her coloratura flights in the high range—maintains focus on her nobility and lofty standards. Because of her refusal to compromise, 20th-century musicologists loathed Anna, finding her cold and unpleasant. One even suggested in print that it would have been beneficial "if she had been pleasantly raped by Don Juan." Given such attitudes, Micaela Baranello is not surprised that "we still have a long way to go when it comes to believing women, and the idea that Donna Anna is lying to preserve her virtue is a terribly plausible, even obvious, explanation for plenty of people. This I find most disturbing."



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Zerlina easily falls for the Don's sweet talk of a remote fantasy. "Là ci darem la mano," he croons insistently, with the rhythmic accent on "là"—"over there"—where she won't have to pluck turkey feathers or milk the cow. "I will change your fate!" he glibly promises. Canadian baritone Gerald Finley once sang this duet reclining carelessly halfway across the stage from Zerlina. Never once looking her way, he drew her to him with charismatic vocal force alone. Once her near-seduction is discovered, Zerlina's solution is to get things back on track quickly with her fiancé, Masetto. "Beat me, beat me," she coos, reminding him that their relationship is blissfully physical and that she's on board with the matrimonial statutes. And when he in turn is victimized by Giovanni, she soothes Masetto's wounds with renewed physical grounding, "touch me here, touch me here." For the work's premiere in Prague, Zerlina was played by the prima donna, wife of the director of the company. In the 19th century, Viardot still found her a complex and interesting character, "not a soubrette who pretends to be naïve, but a bold child of the south who involuntarily comes under the influence of Don Giovanni's demonical nature. She is fascinated by him like a bird by a snake."

Between Anna's high road and Zerlina's earthiness, Elvira is one of the most misunderstood characters in opera. Her music is serious, rangy, angular, and weird, but directors often limit her to comic craziness, having her run about like a harpy and ridiculing her claim that a weekend stint with the Don amounted to marriage. Upon arrival she is forced to listen to Leporello's detailed list of his boss's exploits, a moment that is much more cruel than comic, if taken as truth, but which also has been played as a bizarre and demeaning turn-on for a truly pathological Elvira.

And yet, unless the party scene is staged as an orgy, we never actually see the Don score. He admits that he's having an unusually bad day on that front. But his bad day gets even worse. Many 19th-century productions ended the opera after Don Giovanni's descent to hell, as if no one cared about the aftermath, healing, and renewal. The moral, the comeuppance, was all. Wadsworth's comments on Molière's play fit Da Ponte and Mozart's opera as well. "If Molière hadn't killed Don Juan for his sins, the play wouldn't have gotten onstage at all," he says. "By killing him, and making the play seem like a cautionary tale, he bought himself a forum in which to speak the ideas of the play. And ideas, once spoken publicly, are forever alive, un-killable."

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